Introduction

Strong, caring relationships with adult and peer mentors have long played a crucial role in helping young people thrive academically and overcome challenges they face while at school and at key points in their educational journey. These mentoring relationships for students can be provided at school through volunteer programs embedded in the school day or through afterschool programming, as well as through community-based organizations that operate mentoring services outside of schools. Mentoring relationships that develop naturally can also support educational outcomes, both through the support offered by extended kin, family friends, and community leaders, as well as through the meaningful relationships that are created between students and educators during the school day. In fact, analyses of one prominent national data set suggest that teachers and other school personnel (e.g., counselors, coaches, front office and cafeteria staff) are among the most commonly cited sources of mentors for youth nationwide, even when compared to extended family members, faith leaders, employers, and other groups.[1,2]

The nation's young people keenly need the support of all of these mentors, especially in light of the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational engagement and progress of the nation's students. While many districts and schools have long struggled to raise academic achievement metrics and graduation rates, the multi-year pandemic has greatly impacted every student in America, with the impact hitting hardest on low-income students, students of color, students with learning disabilities, and young people facing adversities and experiencing marginalization. One recent study found that the distance learning and other disruptions of the last few years left the average American student five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-21 school year, with students in majority Black schools ending the year with six months of unfinished learning and students in low-income schools with seven.[3]

Even though in-person school is resuming in most communities across the nation, students have now spent several years disconnected from caring adults in their schools and afterschool settings. A recent study found that only 39% of students felt that adults at school were available to talk to them when they were having problems, a paltry 28% felt like their teachers were making an effort to understand their life outside of school, 43% said they felt like they were part of their school community, and a staggering half of all students in the nation (49%), felt like depression and anxiety were serious obstacles to their virtual learning last year and their ability to do well in school this year.[4] We know that this disengagement —and the wave of adverse life experiences that young people have faced in recent years — increases their risk of disconnecting completely from school and giving up on their educational futures.[5]

This is a critical moment for the nation's young people and their educational development and growth. Here we highlight the positive impact that mentoring relationships – both those that occur in programmatic contexts in and out of schools and those that form naturally in communities – can make in supporting the academic achievement of our nation's students.

Major Research Findings

Several major meta-analyses of mentoring have touted the effectiveness of mentoring that occurs in programs in supporting the educational achievement of young people:

- The 2002 and 2011, meta-analyses by DuBois and colleagues each found evidence that <u>mentoring programs generally have a significant, positive impact on youth academic achievement and educational success, which included outcomes such as improved attendance, grades and test scores, and classroom behavior</u>.[6,7] The more recent 2019 meta-analysis by Raposa and colleagues reached a similar conclusion on a variety of academic outcomes.[8] Similarly, a 2010 meta-analysis of school-based mentoring programs also found evidence of statistically significant positive impact on a variety of outcomes, including truancy and absenteeism, scholastic efficacy, school-related misconduct, and peer support, areas which contribute greatly to academic success, particularly for low-achieving students.[9]

Several recent research syntheses have also highlighted the effectiveness of mentoring relationships in supporting student success.

- A recent in-depth research synthesis by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) National Mentoring Resource Center (NMRC) concluded that mentoring programs generally produce <u>positive impacts on a range of educational outcomes</u>, with moderate-to-large effects being common in programs using evidence-based approaches.[10]

- Research on the ways in which mentors support students' education was explored in a prior NMRC research synthesis, which concluded that mentoring relationships have the potential to influence a range of academic factors, including <u>school connectedness, school engagement, educational self-confidence, and attitudes toward school</u>. Mentors can be especially effective when their support addresses cultural, environmental, and social experiences of youth that can inhibit learning, and when using strategic practices, such as teaching youth how to handle academic stress or set educational goals.[11]

While most research studies on mentoring focus on models using adult mentors, research also suggests that cross-age peer mentoring programs can support student success:

- The NMRC review on peer mentoring models concluded that these programs consistently improve outcomes such as school connectedness and school belonging, while also noting several examples of studies that produced positive impacts on attendance and academic performance. Most notably, cross-age models have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting both younger students and their older peer mentors, who often report gains related to leadership skill and their own academic engagement.

Representative Studies from the Field

While the overarching evidence reviews noted above make it clear that mentoring programs have demonstrated evidence of effectively addressing a wide variety of academic outcomes, the value of mentoring relationships really shines when looking at the results of specific exemplary research studies.

Programs set in schools

- An evaluation of the **Big Brothers Big Sisters** School-Based Mentoring model found significant improvements in teacher-reported academic performance in science and language arts, the quality of class work, the amount of assignments completed, and disciplinary referrals. Youth also reported increased scholastic efficacy and reduced skipping of classes.[12]

- One study of **Gear Up**, a school-based mentoring program for low-income high school students designed to increase academic achievement, found that participants had a statistically significant increase in receiving a C grade or above in algebra I and in scores on a standardized state math exam, compared with the comparison group.[13] Secondary analysis suggested that much of this impact was based on improving youth's relationships with teachers and their own parents to increase their academic support.[14]

- Studies of the **AMPED program**, a short-term, focused mentoring program designed to improve academic motivation and performance, have found statistically significant decreases in unexcused absences and higher math and English grades for participating youth, compared with the control group.[15,16]

- Research on **Project Arrive**, a group mentoring program for students at risk for academic disconnection in the San Francisco Public Schools, found that participating youth had increases in high-school credits earned and increases in instructional time as compared to youth who did not participate in the mentoring program.[17]

- A study of the "**Success Mentors**" mentoring model, which sought to reduce chronic absenteeism in the New York City public schools, found that mentored youth gained an average of almost two weeks of additional attendance over the course of the school year and were 52% more likely to remain in school the next year than comparison students.[18]

- An evaluation of the **Check and Connect** program that combined in-person mentoring with truancy court positions embedded in the school, found that students in the mentoring group were 20 percentage points more likely to graduate high school than students in the comparison group, cutting the dropout rate for targeted students by half.[19]

After-school program examples

- A randomized controlled trial of **Quantum Opportunities**, a four-year mentoring program for high school students vulnerable to dropout, was associated with better GPAs, higher graduate rates, and higher college acceptance rates.[20]

- One evaluation of **Village Model of Care**, a culturally-responsive after-school group mentoring model, found significant positive gains in grade point average for the mentored students compared to a control group — especially mentored students whose parents were also highly engaged in the program.

- There are even prominent international examples of after-school mentoring making a difference for youth; for example, the **Pathways to Education** program in Canada, which combines after-school mentoring and tutoring with a range of skill-building and college access opportunities. One study of the program found that youth eligible for the program were more likely to have graduated from high school and enrolled in postsecondary education within five years after starting high school, compared with youth in the comparison group.[21]

Mentoring relationships with teachers, school personnel, and other caring adults youth engage with naturally

Lastly there are several examples of how teachers, counselors, and other school personnel can make a major difference when they build on existing relationships with students and offer extra mentoring support:

- A study of the **Achievement Mentoring Program**, which used teachers and other school employees as mentors for struggling freshmen at risk of dropping out, found the program had statistically significant positive effects on discipline referrals, negative school behavior, performance in mathematics and language arts, and perceptions of teacher support and peer acceptance.[22,23]

- Analysis of the **Add Health data set** found that students who reported having a teacher as their mentor had higher educational attainment than those whose mentor was an extended kin relationship or a friend. Having a teacher as mentor predicted levels of eventual educational attainment in life, even when controlling for factors like 9th grade GPA.[24]

- Recent research by the **Search Institute** on their model of "developmental relationships" shows that students who have higher levels of developmental relationships with teachers feel more connected to school, are more motivated to work hard, and have better GPAs.[25]

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- Another study of **mentoring relationships** that formed naturally among **teachers and students** found that youth who indicated they had a teacher who they viewed as a mentor had significantly stronger school attachment a year later, suggesting that these relationships influence how young people experience school.[26]

- Many other studies have shown strong associations between mentoring relationships that form naturally and improved attitudes about school[27], as well as improved academic performance in high school[28] and meaningful educational attainment, such as **high school graduation** and **college attendance**.[29]

- Mentoring relationships that form naturally may be particularly impactful for students of color. Many studies have demonstrated that relationships can lead to improvements in future educational expectations[30], increases in perceptions of the importance of school, and higher educational attainment for students of color reporting the presence of natural mentors.[31] These studies demonstrate that mentors can build positive racial regard, reduce stereotype threat, and **help students overcome systemic oppression** related to their educational experiences.

Opportunities Ahead

The research cited here clearly illustrates that mentors—both volunteers provided through programs and mentoring relationships that form naturally with teachers, coaches, and other caring adults—can have a profound positive impact on the educational success of the nation's students. But there is considerable work to be done to ensure that each student has access to these mentors. In fact, many of the studies cited here have noted that these relationships are very inequitably distributed across society[32] and that youth of color, low-income youth, and youth whose parents have limited education report having far fewer mentoring relationships and less natural mentoring support from teachers and school personnel, in particular. (See studies 2, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31 for more discussion of these racial and socioeconomic disparities.)

Mentoring is an innovative, evidence-based practice with a wide range of positive academic and non-academic outcomes for young people. As such, mentoring is one of few prevention and intervention strategies that have the potential to support young people of all demographics and backgrounds in all aspects of their lives. There are many paths forward to ensure that all American students – especially those less likely to have robust mentoring support – get the relationships they need to thrive in the years ahead; but to sum it up, it requires private and public investment and the local, state, and federal level. MENTOR advocates for and supports legislation and policies that expand the quantity and quality of mentoring relationships across the country.

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