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**Testimony in Support of the Hearing on Serving All Students:
Promoting a Healthier, More Supportive School Environment**

Prepared for the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

On behalf of MENTOR, our network of Affiliates, and thousands of youth mentoring programs across the country, I thank Chairman Sablan and Ranking Member Owens for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of today's hearing, "Promoting a Healthier, More Supportive School Environment." We are heartened by the historic and mounting public attention on the social, emotional and mental well-being of students due to the pandemic and a broader reckoning with inequities facing young people. Just last week, the Senate Finance Committee held a hearing on youth mental health that unpacked concerning data of increasing youth suicide rates and feelings of hopelessness and sadness. The dire findings shared in the Surgeon General's recent advisory¹ on youth mental health presents added urgency to this issue, as well as surveys that center the voices of our young people. We have an opportunity to address these issues with the proportional response they require as well as a long overdue approach that considers the inextricable linkage between academic achievement, mental, social, and physical health. Schools are one of the most critical place-based ingredients in this solution because of their role as a touchstone in the lives of our young people and their families and communities. But schools cannot be expected to tackle this panoply of issues exacerbated by the pandemic on their own. With all this in mind, the topic of this hearing is more important and timelier than ever.

Mentors—both as volunteers provided through structured programs inside and outside of school, and through relationships that form naturally with teachers, coaches, faith leaders and other caring adults—can have a profound positive impact on the educational success, healthy development, and overall wellbeing of the nation's students. 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.

Research shows that young people with a mentor are 55% more likely to be enrolled in college, and are 130% more likely to hold a leadership position in a club or sports team. But access to these relationships is not equitable. While some students report many caring adult relationships, other students don't have any.

¹ Protecting Youth Mental Health, 2021, U.S. Surgeon General <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

At MENTOR, we believe the solution is to help schools become relationship-centered by viewing and measuring relationships with the same intentionality and rigor as academics and other indicators of student success.² This mapping work, if aligned with policy and funding, will lead to design, training, staffing, and partnership work to meet the full needs of our students within their context so they can thrive and strive.

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 from *Applied Developmental Science* suggest that teachers and other school personnel, such as 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.^{3 4}

The nation's young people keenly need the support of all of these mentors, especially in light of the disruption of the educational progress of students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, one in three young people across America lacked connection to adults outside their home, often resulting in a sense of isolation, a reduced sense of purpose, and disconnection from key resources and experiences needed for learning and advancement.⁵

And while we have seen and heard about the incredible resilience of our nation's young people, recent research shows that nearly 75% of young people feel disconnected from adults and their peers, and more than 50% of young people are much more concerned than usual about their personal and their family's physical and emotional health. Navigating a global pandemic has resulted in millions of young people facing new and intensified barriers to succeeding in school, getting a good job, and engaging in their community. These young people continue to need access to consistent adult mentors who will help them experience belonging, identify their purpose, navigate twists and turns, and realize their potential.

In a recent op-ed published in *The Hill*⁶ by myself and Dr. Stephanie M. Jones, a professor of child development and education at the Harvard Graduate School for Education, we posit a relationship-first design and approach in schools is the way forward to effectively respond to the social, emotional, and mental health needs of our students. Analyses⁷ have proven that mentoring can help young people across a variety of mental health outcomes, and published research shows that trained paraprofessionals can deliver light mental health interventions often as effectively as professionals can, demonstrating that scaling trained mentors can help reduce the burden on existing systems of mental health care. Most schools cannot expect to effectively do this without additional support – but they can make efforts to ensure they are prepared to support individual student needs and integrate the relational needs of students into their measures.

² Relationship-Centered Schools, MENTOR and ASA <https://youtu.be/nSegUeteLWY>

³ Christensen, K., Raposa, E., Hagler, M., Erickson, L., & Rhodes, J. (2019). Role of athletic coach mentors in promoting youth academic success: Evidence from the Add Health national longitudinal study. *Applied Developmental Science*, 25, 1-11. 10.1080/10888691.2019.1582344.

⁴ Raposa, E. B., Erickson, L. D., Hagler, M., & Rhodes, J. E. (2018). How economic disadvantage affects the availability and nature of mentoring relationships during the transition to adulthood. *American journal of community psychology*, 61(1-2), 191–203. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12228>

⁵ Mary Bruce and John Bridgeland. The Mentoring Effect: Young People's Perspectives on the Outcomes and Availability of Mentoring. Civic Enterprises with Hart Research Associates for MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, 2014.

⁶ The Hill <https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/587430-the-youth-mental-health-crisis-is-real-but-teachers-cant-solve-it-alone>

⁷ McQuillin, S. D., Hagler, M. A., Wertz, A., & Rhodes, J. E. (2021), Paraprofessional youth mentoring: A framework for integrating youth mentoring with helping institutions and professions. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12546>
DuBois, D. L., Herrera, C., & Higley, E. (2018).

MENTOR and local mentoring organizations have worked with districts and schools across the nation to make this transformative shift to integrated and holistic student supports. For instance, schools can provide the training and technical support for their staff to mentor students, or partner with before- and after- school providers, community-based organizations, and professional services organizations providing mental and physical health supports to bridge efforts inside the school building with services in the community. Districts must also ensure all schools have the necessary staff on hand to address critical student needs (such as school counselors, psychologists, nurses and, of course, teachers).

This is a critical moment for the nation's young people. MENTOR has compiled dozens of studies and research demonstrating the positive impact that mentoring relationships can make in supporting the academic achievement of our nation's students.⁸ To achieve these positive impacts, support and funding specifically for mentoring is needed.

As the Subcommittee further examines effective ways to promote a healthier and more supportive school environment, we encourage the following actions:

- **Increased federal funding resources to specifically support innovative and evidence-based mentoring practices.** In the past, the U.S. Department of Education has funded a school-based mentoring program. Unfortunately, now the federal government's only mentoring-specific line item resides at the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Because of the myriad ways in which mentoring supports youth – including their education, mental health, workforce development, and more – we believe that OJJDP should not be the only federal agency investing in youth mentoring. *Two relevant bills under the jurisdiction of this committee have been introduced to address this issue: [H.R. 6481, the Transition-to-Success Mentoring Act](#), and [H.R. 4076, the Mentoring to Succeed Act of 2021](#).*
- **Guidance and direction from the U.S. Department of Education on existing funding sources.** Title IV-A, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and even pandemic relief funds through the American Rescue Plan all enable LEA's to utilize funds to build mentoring relationships and supports into their programming. Unfortunately, many states have communicated that they are lacking the resources and guidance to implement a successful school-based mentoring program. The Department of Education could update guidance and refer LEA's to the [National Mentoring Resource Center](#), an online resource and training and technical assistance hub where school districts can apply to receive evidence-based TA at no cost to them.

Thank you again for this opportunity. Please contact Caden Fabbi (cfabbi@mentoring.org) on MENTOR's team with any follow up questions about this testimony or the data cited throughout.

⁸ Mentoring and Education Outcomes (2021) MENTOR <https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Mentoring-and-Educational-Outcomes.pdf>