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The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, funded by the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), works in collaboration with [Education Development Center, Inc. \(EDC\)](#), and the National Dropout Prevention Center at [Clemson University](#).
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[The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs \(OSEP\)](#) is committed to positive results for children with disabilities. The National Dropout Prevention

The Big IDEA:

Mentoring is a cornerstone in student engagement, and serves many beneficial functions for students, particularly for students with disabilities. Mentoring helps to promote more positive attitudes toward school and improve students' academic performance and self concept!



**Mentoring:
A Bridge to Student Achievement!**

By Julia Wilkins, Research Associate
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Mentoring typically refers to "a relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger protégé - a relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé" (Rhodes, 2002, p.3). Most school-based mentoring programs involve weekly meetings in which mentors and mentees engage in a variety of academic and nonacademic activities. Mentors may be classroom teachers, other school staff, or community members, and mentoring may be offered to individual students or small groups. While one-on-one mentoring has obvious benefits, group mentoring can be particularly helpful to students who need to develop social skills in relating to peers (Herrera, Vang, & Gale, 2002).

Mentoring is a cornerstone in student engagement, and serves many beneficial functions for students, such as helping to promote more positive attitudes toward school and improving students' academic performance, self-concept, and interpersonal skills (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Students who are mentored are more likely to attend school and participate in school activities (Eby et al., 2008; Jekielek, Moore, & Hair, 2002), which are situations that promote students' sense of attachment to school. Being connected to the school environment is a critical component of dropout prevention.

It has been found that most students who drop out of high school failed to develop significant relationships with adults at school (Muller, 2001). Teachers provide the human connection to the school setting and close student-teacher relationships can help to increase students' sense of belonging to school (Daniels & Aprapostathis, 2005; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Of more than 500 dropouts surveyed by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006), only 41% said they had someone they could talk to in school about personal problems. Seventy-percent of youth believed more tutoring, summer school, and extra time with teachers would have improved their chances of graduating.

Mentoring can be particularly beneficial for students with disabilities. ICF International (2008) evaluated Communities In Schools of Texas, each campus of which provided: supportive guidance from a caring adult, health and human services, parental and family involvement, career awareness and employment services, and educational enrichment activities. It was found that special education case-managed students were 1.55 times more likely to graduate from high school than their non-special education case-managed classmates. In an evaluation of the Check-and-Connect Program, in which students with disabilities received individualized support from designated



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A program, in which students with disabilities received individualized support from designated advocates/mentors, it was found that students were less likely to drop out at the end of years 4 and 5 than control group students. Mentors conducted attendance monitoring, family outreach, and facilitated students' participation in school-related activities. In addition to relationship-building between adults and students, the program focused on developing students' life skills, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal skills (Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005).

Mentors play practical roles, such as providing students with guidance, individualized academic support, connecting them to community resources, establishing relationships with their family, and working with other teachers and professionals to address their barriers to success, but they also serve many other functions that support students' social and emotional well-being. For example, when students meet with their mentors, they get time away from daily stressors in school and they are engaging in interpersonal experiences that can help to improve their other social relationships (Rhodes et al., 2006).

While many positive benefits have been reported in studies of formal mentoring programs, it is important not to discount the importance of naturally acquired mentoring relationships. Ahrens, DuBois, Lozano, and Richardson (2010) examined the role of adults who had relationships that lasted for 2 or more years with students with specific learning disabilities. Rather than being formally designated to mentor students, adults were naturally acquired through students' interactions with adults in the school setting; mentoring involved providing students with guidance/advice, emotional support, role modeling, or serving as a parent figure. It was found that receiving such informal mentoring increased students' likelihood of graduating. Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren (2004) also conducted a study in which they found that students with disabilities who had identified a helpful person in school had a lower probability of dropping out than students with disabilities who had not identified a helpful person in school.

Mentoring is a particularly beneficial component of dropout prevention programs because it lets students know that there is someone who cares about them and that they are not alone in dealing with their problems. The underlying purpose of youth mentoring is to establish supportive relationships between youth and their mentors. Relationships are typically based on caring, respect, positive expectations, and developing friendships (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). In a qualitative study of students with disabilities who had several risk factors for not graduating, Murray and Naranjo (2008) found that all participants identified teachers as an important source of support: teachers got to know students on a one-on-one basis, provided help with work when students were struggling, pushed students to succeed, and fulfilled the role of a caring adult who monitored students' progress over time. In other words, even when students have connections to caring adults who are not formal mentors, these relationships can be instrumental in preventing students from dropping out of school.

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HIGHLIGHT ON WEST VIRGINIA

A Mentoring Program for Students with Disabilities at Wheeling Park High School

by Amy Minch, Principal

In order to address the dropout problem among students with disabilities, the administration and staff at Wheeling Park High School in Ohio County aimed to create highly personalized supports and services for students characterized by strong relationships with adults. Two years ago, a mentoring program was established to facilitate closer student-teacher relationships among special education students. All special education students were matched with a mentor, who was also the teacher responsible for their Individualized Education Program (IEP). All special education teachers were relieved of homeroom duties so they could meet with students on a daily basis to monitor their performance and identify areas in which they need additional support.

Meetings are held individually and in small groups, determined by student need. Each teacher has a caseload of about 18-20 students with whom they provide assistance with homework, tutoring, test prep, academic progress, and communicates with general education teachers, conduct parent conferences/home visits, and work with guidance counselors and outside agencies. A student at Wheeling Park High School reported,

"I meet with my advisor to go over my grades and any problems I am having in class. We make sure I am staying on track to graduate. I like knowing I can always go to her at that time and talk and work on things."

Amy Rice, a special education teacher at Wheeling Park, also reflected on the benefits of being a mentor:

"Having homeroom as a time to meet with my advisees has been beneficial. During this time, I am able to get to know each student and to cultivate relationships. We review grades, IEP accommodations and services, and schedules. We look at how accommodations are being met in each class and discuss how to self-advocate. On occasion, my advisees and I use this time to role-play ways to approach/handle challenging situations with their teachers and/or peers."

Since the implementation of the mentoring program, class failures have declined and graduation rates have increased among students with disabilities. Mentoring is just one of many interventions that has been implemented at the high school to increase the graduation rate of students with disabilities. Some of the other interventions include increased attendance monitoring, an after-school tutoring program, and credit recovery classes. Together, these interventions have resulted in dramatic increases in the graduation rate of students with disabilities. In the 2010-2011 school year, the graduation rate for students with disabilities at Wheeling Park High School was 55.3%. In the 2012-2013 school year, the graduation rate for students with disabilities had increased by 23% to 78.3%.

Mentoring Program in Monroe County

By Sherry Baker, Drop-Out Prevention and Student Assistant Team Specialist

In order to reduce the number of students who drop out of the high school in Monroe County, in the fall of 2011, administrators and teachers in the county decided to address student engagement by attending to relationships with adults and peers in the school setting. There is just one high school in the county and so interventions were implemented at this school--James Monroe High School. Staff reviewed lists of students with and without disabilities who had identified at-risk indicators,

including poor attendance, behavior, and course performance, retentions, and lack of involvement in extracurricular activities. The county then established a mentoring program for these students who were identified as being at-risk of dropping out.

In addition to their work with the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD), the county obtained a grant through *Education Alliance: AmeriCorps on the Frontline* to hire three part-time AmeriCorps members to serve as mentors alongside school staff, central office staff, and community volunteers. Central Office employees were assigned a specific school to work with the principal and volunteering staff. Community volunteers were recruited through community forums explaining the importance of a "significant someone" in the life of every student.

All mentors are assigned one student and all mentoring is conducted one-on-one. During their time together, mentors assist students with academics, appropriate behavior, and encourage regular school attendance. Several students have noted that they would not have graduated or passed to the next grade level without their assigned mentor.

In addition to strengthening relationships between adults and students through mentoring, the county also attended to peer relationships by establishing Finish Line clubs that focus on interactive, team-building activities for students who are not involved in other school clubs. Having friendship networks in school gives students a reason to attend and makes them less likely to drop out.

The mentoring program and Finish Line Clubs were not implemented as stand-alone interventions. Other interventions designed to reduce dropout included expanding credit recovery offerings and allowing students with disabilities to enroll in the GED Options program. Together, the dropout prevention interventions in Monroe County have been successful in reducing the dropout rate of students with disabilities. In the 2010-2011 school year, the graduation rate for students with disabilities at the high school was 54%. In the 2011-2012 school year, the graduation rate for students with disabilities had increased to 64% and in the 2012-2013 school year, it had increased to 80%.

Upcoming Events

A CASE Legislative Leadership Seminar

July 13-16, 2014, Alexandria VA

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

Annual Conference on Advancing School Mental Health

September 18-20, 2014, Pittsburgh, PA

<http://csmh.umaryland.edu/Conferences/AnnualConference/>

26th Annual National Dropout Prevention Network Conference

November 2-5, 2014, Louisville, KY

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/conferences/26th-annual-national-dropout-prevention-network-conference>

Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (TED) 2014 Conference

November 4-8, 2014, Indianapolis, IN

<http://www.tedcec.org/conferences/ted-2014-conference-indianapolis>

Resource Center

School-Based Mentoring

http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_387.pdf

The Role of Risk: Mentoring Experiences and Outcomes for Youth with Varying Risk Profiles

http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Role%20of%20Risk_Final-web%20PDF.pdf

Strengthening Mentoring Opportunities for At-Risk

Youth http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_1233.pdf

Applying the Principles of Prevention: What Do Prevention Practitioners Need to Know About What Works? http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_4.pdf

Research in Action Series from MENTOR

http://www.mentoring.org/news_and_research/research_and_studies/research_in_action

What Research Tells us About Effective Youth Mentoring Programs

http://whatworks.uwex.edu/attachment/factsheet_2mentoring.pdf

Useful Websites

Mentor: National Mentoring Partnership
<http://www.mentoring.org/>

Youth Mentoring Connection
<http://youthmentoring.org/>

Big Brothers Big Sisters
<http://www.bbbs.org/site/c.9iILl3NGKhK6F/b.5962335/k.BE16/Home.htm>

Community Toolbox: Youth Mentoring Programs
<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/youth-mentoring>

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