

How a Successful Mentoring Program Can Change Much More Than Just Your School

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Background That Led to Your Team's Inquiry:

Within our school we have a few different counseling services that consistently work with kids to help them through difficult times. There is an extremely high need, to encourage a number of "at-risk" students, to counsel students not currently being serviced through our local community TALKS mentoring program or from our Wabash Valley counselors.

As we all know, the mental health problem in our country is rampant and these specific counseling services cannot reach all who are in desperate need of these positive interactions with healthcare professionals. The dilemma is reaching all of the students in need. Our option was to say, "we don't have enough help" and just throw our hands in the air, or organize a mentoring program among our caring and loving staff to help with the issue. Thankfully, we chose the second option!

Therefore, the purpose of our action research was to see if we could make a difference in more kids' lives. Fortunately, we are making a difference one student at a time. This is not a quick fix or an overnight solution, but it is more of a culture change in our school community.

Statement of Your Team's Wondering:

With this purpose, we wondered, if we developed a personal and very positive relationship with many of the at-risk children in our school, would it make a difference? Will these positive daily interactions change the behaviors, efforts in class, attendance at school, or overall attitude of the student and staff member? We hope these extra efforts will enhance the safe and collaborative culture in our school.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insight into our wondering, we looked into other similar schools' ideas of how they help students in a one-on-one mentoring program. There were ideas we found that we knew could work for us so we began putting the plans together to make it happen. There was a survey sent to the staff to see how many adults would be interested in taking on a child to be mentored. We had overwhelming support and immediately got some excitement about the program. A referral form was sent to the staff to create an appropriate list of students in need and then we began matching up mentors to the mentees.

The mentors got together (in November) and established protocols and goals and put these into a mentoring handbook for the program to follow. We organized a data collection spreadsheet to track times of day/ week the mentors met with the mentees and any specific details that we felt needed to be addressed.

After the program got kicked-off in December, the mentors met monthly to talk about concerns and issues that arose from what they heard or learned from the students. We developed plans to help these students (homework help, backpacks filled with food, clothes, toiletries, etc).

Relationships developed between the mentors and mentees and much accountability was obvious through the conversations had on a daily basis. Attendance rates improved, not only for the students, but for the adults as well. No one wanted to miss out on the daily interactions! More homework was completed, the grades went up, and the discipline referrals went down. Much pride was visible among the mentors and mentees as they spent time eating lunch together or shooting hoops after school. Not every matchup was ideal, but most were and it was great to witness the end of the year kickball game between the kids and adults. The students loved this and the adults did as well.

This program is the start of something very special and we look forward to expanding it next year!

Stating Your Team's Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing our data, two things we learned include: giving a little extra effort to help a student reaps benefits much more than we can imagine, and when we hold students accountable they want to please you if you show how much you care.

Tracking the daily data as our mentors met with the mentees, we found that less than 5 minutes of attention daily can change the entire dynamic of a young person's outlook on school and more importantly, life! Improved efforts in the classroom, better attendance at school, and an attitude worthy of improved friendships are all ways we saw improvements from many of the students in our Mustang Mentors program. These improvements were hoped for and really expected when learning about the safe and collaborative culture as we read A Handbook for High Reliability Schools. (Marzano, 33-34)

The students enjoyed checking in daily with their assigned adult and when one was not present (for whatever reason), there was a disappointment and a form of accountability that had to be answered to the following day. The adults found out that when they share an expectation with the student, the student also holds he or she accountable as well! This was shown with the attendance taken and comments on our data spreadsheet collected. Although, other than a daily check-in data report, we did not have any real concrete data, we did get to track attendance, discipline, and grades. The results were outstanding and we look forward to seeing the relationships improve more next year.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

Our teacher led team has learned a plethora about the adults in our school. Although, at times we've had some animosity toward one another and some adversity that has kept the adults from always getting along, we are all here for the same reason! We love kids and want to see them succeed. This makes us very excited and proud to be a part of the SEFE team.

The mentoring program has taught us that our need to give individual attention to our students is not just wanted, but it is an actual need. We have learned how needy our kids really are and that their poor mental states need mended. Knowing the students on a personal level has given us an opportunity to develop a trusting relationship that has shown the kids how much they are truly cared about. Moving forward, we need to encourage our mentor numbers to increase and the relationships with the students to build stronger and stronger.

Overall, this program was a huge success this year, but we believe it will grow and improve as we share our success stories and rare but inevitable pitfalls as well. Learning from our mistakes and building on the successes will improve our efforts and ultimately give us a better environment for the students to learn.

References:

Marzano, R. J., Warrick, P., & Simms, J. A. (2014). *A Handbook for High Reliability Schools: The Next Step in School Reform*. Bloomington, IN: Simms.