

National Implications in Education and Juvenile Justice: Bridging the Gap Between Court Order Juvenile Mentoring Programs and Secondary Educators

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with effective strategies to show that educators and school administrators can utilize court-ordered mentors, for at-risk juveniles placed in their classrooms. In the late 1980's and 1990's there was a convergence of two major events in juvenile justice. These were the reduction of government funds to address serious social problems, such as crime, and the increase of juvenile crime in the United States. A way to combat this increased juvenile crime problem and decrease of available funds was to pair juveniles under court supervision with responsible adult counterparts to provide a positive influence. These mentoring programs provided a cost-effective and strong influence on juveniles in the court system. The goal of this article is to educate teachers and school administrators about programs that their students might be required to attend and utilizing these programs to assist them in the classroom. This article also provides teachers and administrators support strategies in developing allies with these mentoring programs to better serve the youth and community.

Introduction

When dealing with students that have been arrested and shuffled through the juvenile criminal justice system, it is having the full understanding of the juvenile's home life that can explain problems in the classroom. After juveniles are placed on probation by a local juvenile court, the court often orders as a condition of this probation participation in a youth mentoring program. This program pairs the juvenile with a responsible adult counterpart to act as a positive reinforcement for the juvenile. This mentor can often act as a mediator and teacher to the juvenile while engaged in the program. According to one advocate at a youth mentoring program in Houston, Texas, teachers are often unaware that the juvenile has a mentor that can assist with their academic success. This advocate stated she has experienced that when teachers do find out about a mentor's identity they are often pleased that an adult has taken an interest in the child's education. The parents often have given up on the child or do not have the financial means to take off time from work to participate in the child's educational experience. Spreading this knowledge- and letting the educational system be aware that this ally might exist in students in most secondary schools- are reasons for this article. This article strives to educate the teacher and administrator on what mentoring programs are and how their students can benefit from the programs' services.

The purpose of this article is to offer secondary teachers and administrators effective strategies when dealing with students under court-ordered probation stipulating participation in a mentoring program.

What are Juvenile Mentoring programs?

Mentoring programs consist of matching a young adult offender with an adult resident of the community, who becomes an advisor/mentor of the youth and family. Generally these programs are a part of a court order placing the juvenile on probation for committing a crime. According to Jones-Brown, juvenile justice mentoring is the one-on-one interaction of law-binding members of a community with delinquents or juveniles "at risk" of becoming delinquent, with the aim being to prevent or reduce the juvenile's involvement in law-violating behavior (1997). As a juvenile justice strategy, mentoring is an opportunity to provide support to the juvenile where it is missing, particularly in instances of high rates of family disruption. Mentoring makes alternate adult support networks available to juveniles and provides alternate opportunity for intimate relations (Cullen, 1994). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention mentoring is not a new concept. Examples of mentoring can be found as far back as the late 19th century when the Friendly Visiting Campaign, supported by social charities, recruited hundreds of middle-class women to work with the poor immigrant communities (Freedman, 1993). The federal government recognized that mentoring could be beneficial to the rehabilitation of juveniles as outlines in the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency

Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974. According to Sheldon Reichstein, Director of The Harris County Youth Advocate Program located in Houston Texas, the Harris County program works in conjunction with the county juvenile probation programs. The juvenile probation department refers juvenile offenders to their program after the court has stipulated it on the juvenile's terms and conditions. According to Mr. Reichstein, the program is based on the theory that the roots of delinquency are found in the family and neighborhood where the youth and family reside. Advocates are not expected to have a lot of formal training in a helping discipline; however, they are given introductory training on effective mentoring strategies and dealing with aggressive juveniles. According to the Harris County Youth Advocate Program, a majority of the participants in the programs come from a low socio-economic class and single parent families so training in those areas is especially provided.

According to the Harris County Youth Advocate program the following statistical findings were provided regarding their program:

- During 2002, approximately three hundred and twenty three (323) juveniles were referred to the program. In 2002, one hundred and ninety four (194) youths were discharged from the Harris County Youth advocate program.
- In 2002, 60,632 hours of advocacy services were provided to the juveniles in the program.
- The average number of days that a juvenile participates in the program is 107 days per client.
- On average, nine percent of clients were arrested during their participation in the program. Six percent of youth were discharged for absconding from the program. Five percent (5%) of the juveniles were discharged for failing to adequately engage with the program.
- Twenty-four (24%) percent of juveniles in the program are white, twenty-nine (29%) percent of juveniles are Hispanic, forty-six (46%) percent of the juveniles are African American and one (1%) percent are of Asian decent.
- Only eleven (11%) of the juveniles in the program have parents who are considered married and together.

Utilizing Mentors: Effective Strategies for Teachers and Educators

According to one advocate that was interviewed, the parents of some of these at risk children are often out of the picture or most have given up on them due to significant behavior problems. The advocate acts as a responsible adult that has a stake in the juvenile's success through the juvenile justice program. The parents of these children are often low socio-economic status and do not possess transportation and time off from their jobs to conduct a proper staffing with the juveniles' teachers and counselors. The advocate can act as a buffer to the school and the family. If the juvenile has disciplinary problems in class, it is often noticed by teachers that the parents are not available or have

given up on the child. The mentor can mediate with the school and the probation department or court judge to help change the juvenile's attitude. Sometimes if the parents do not provide the discipline at home for the child, the court must intervene. The advocate can assist the teacher in letting the probation officer or judge know that discipline is a problem in the classroom.

The mentor offers a helping hand to the educator by keeping the juvenile focused on academic progress. The mentor can assist the student with academic problems. Because the mentor must spend at least 20 hours a week with the juvenile, the mentor can observe the juvenile for potential learning disabilities that can be properly treated. Below is a list of support strategies that the mentor can provide the school and how the teacher and school administrators can benefit from utilizing mentors that are assigned to their students:

Support Strategies for the Mentor:

1. Mediator between family and school
2. Mediator between school and juvenile justice system
3. Supportive adult to teaching staff regarding optimism for juveniles' progress.
4. Acts as a surrogate parent for transporting the juvenile to school, tutoring sessions and school activities.
5. Positive reinforcement and tutoring of the juvenile
6. Service database for referrals to community resources (i.e., counseling programs, job training, tutoring etc.)

The teacher/administrator:

1. Can utilize the mentor to address immediate behavioral problems and serve as a pipeline to the courts if intervention is needed.
2. Can utilize the mentor to observe for learning disabilities so immediate action can be taken.
3. Can utilize the mentor to identify any outside school problems that affect the student's performance in the classroom (i.e., family has little money this week for food and the student might be suffering from nutritional problems or hunger)
4. Can utilize the mentor to identify the juvenile's talents, strengths and interests not clearly observed by teaching staff.
5. Can utilize the mentor to relay messages to parents and serve as an additional communication link to parents.

6. Can utilize the mentoring program's grants to assist with purchasing school supplies, uniforms, bus passes, meal tickets, etc. that can correlate with the juvenile's academic success.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, teaching "at risk" students that are on probation can be often challenging to any seasoned teacher or administrator. The goal of this article is to educate teachers and administrators on programs that their students might be required to attend and how to utilize these programs to assist them in the classroom. Sometimes the teacher might be aware that the student is on probation but may not be familiar with programs they are required to attend. The mentor also acts as another set of eyes that can pinpoint problems that could explain behaviors the teachers observe in class. Having these external allies in your corner can often provide a stronger positive reinforcement to the juvenile that caring people can assist them through their academic challenges.

References

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