EDUCATION

THE EDUCATION VOLUNTEER CALL TO ACTION

United Way

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THE CHALLENGE

United Way has set out a challenge—to our 1,246 state and local United Ways and our national, state and local partners—to help cut the high school dropout number in half by 2018.

Reading is linked to high school success. That's because children are learning to read for the first few years of school, but after fourth grade they're reading to learn. Without strong reading skills, they fall behind, disengage and often drop out.

Today, two-thirds of American fourth graders cannot read at grade level. The short-fall in reading proficiency is especially pronounced among low-income, African-American and Latino children. Disadvantaged children come to school at least two years behind their peers in pre-reading skills.[1] It is hard to catch up—especially after second or third grade.

Together, we can do something about it. United Ways all over the country are recruiting people with passion, expertise and resources to make a difference in this area. They're galvanizing people to read to preschoolers, tutor third graders and mentor kids who need a caring adult in their lives.
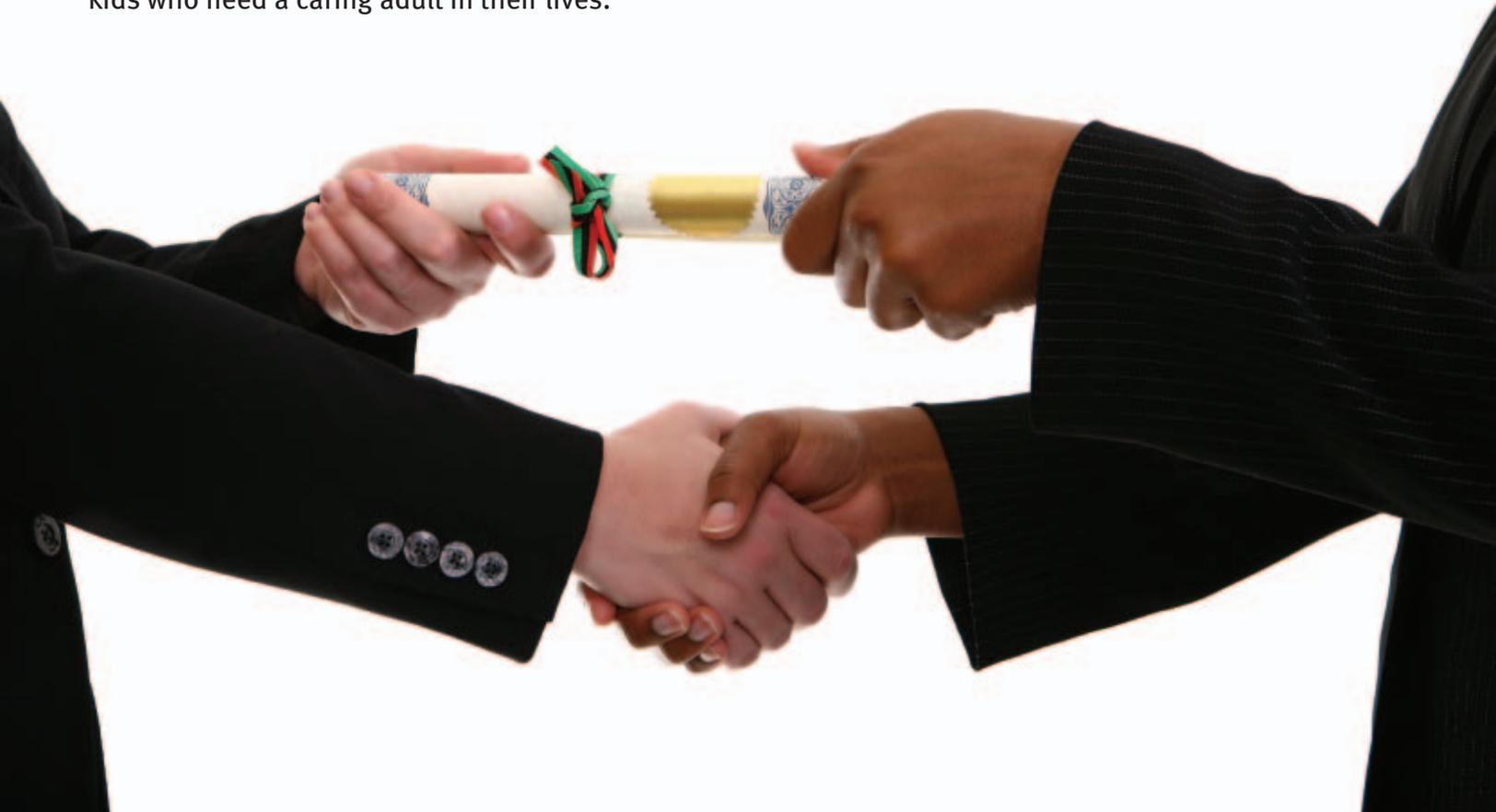
THE EDUCATION VOLUNTEER
CALL TO ACTION

As part of our national strategy to mobilize communities around education, United Way has issued an **EDUCATION VOLUNTEER CALL TO ACTION**. We want one million people—including young adults, retirees, faith communities and employees—to join us over the next three years. Anyone with passion and commitment can help a young person achieve greater academic success. Volunteers can make the difference.

Research shows that caring adults working with kids of all ages—from the early years through high school—can help boost academic achievement. With a wide range of national partners, we will offer many opportunities to be an education volunteer, nationally or locally, online or in person.

WHY SPOTLIGHT VOLUNTEER READERS, TUTORS AND MENTORS?

As Bob Balfanz, a noted researcher at Johns Hopkins University, puts it, we need a "second shift of caring adults" to support children. Kids spend 20% of their waking hours school, so extra support has to extend beyond the classroom—into after school time, summers and weekends.

Experts say that engaging our children—meeting them where they are, in their own learning style—is critical. Throughout their school careers, connecting them with as many well trained, supportive adults as possible, both in and out of school, can nurture their strengths and make sure help is directed where it is most needed. Reading, tutoring and mentoring can play an important role in increasing academic success and engagement in learning.

VOLUNTEER READERS

Poor academic skills are often rooted in family environments in which adults don't talk a lot with children, or surround them with books and other reading materials.[2] As a child grows, reading becomes increasingly important for understanding the world, achieving academic success and succeeding in the workforce. The foundation for reading reaches a critical juncture between kindergarten and third grade. That's when children begin to acquire the skills that enable them to find meaning in written text.[3] One of United Way's education focus areas prioritizes the development of strong reading skills by the end of third grade—a phase when parents, formal/informal caregivers and volunteer readers can make a real difference.

What the Research Says

Reading and helping children to engage in storytelling is a fun and easy way for a volunteer to support literacy development. Studies have shown that effectively reading to children requires minimal training and can yield positive results. Minnesota Reading Corps, an AmeriCorps program that provides trained literacy tutors to children age three to grade three, recruits volunteers that focus on integrating talking, reading and writing into all classroom activities. Others provide supplemental literacy skills tutoring for children in kindergarten to third grade. The Minnesota Reading Corp evaluated 1,600 pre-kindergarten

Early Literacy at United Way of Allen County

More than 1,000 third graders in Allen County, Indiana aren't reading on grade level. Statistics suggest that 74% of those children may not catch up. That's why United Way made a 10-year commitment to ensuring all local children read at grade level by the end of third grade. *Learn United* is a collaborative effort coordinated by United Way of Allen County, the Allen County Education Partnership, the Greater Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce and the four local school districts. At the center of this effort are three goals:

❏ All women have access to early and regular prenatal care. One in seven Allen County babies is born prematurely. By helping prevent premature births, the need for costly special education later in life is reduced.

❏ All children enter school with the literacy skills needed to learn to read. Kids with more exposure to reading prior to kindergarten have a huge advantage — all kids should have that advantage.

❏ All third graders in Allen County pass their state reading test. Third grade is a pivotal year in a child's education, so passing the state reading test is an indicator of their future success.

United Way of Allen County has aligned its workplace giving campaign with the issue of early literacy, helping community residents understand how they can Give, Advocate and Volunteer to support early literacy. United Way is connecting volunteers with struggling readers in kindergarten through third grade. They've also implemented Real Men Read, in which men read with second and third graders in classrooms; and Story Friend, in which volunteers read books with pre-kindergarten children.

children participating in the program and found that more than half of the participants scoring below average in the fall had scored at or above the target by the spring. Significant numbers of students were shown to make progress in rhyming, letter sound fluency, picture naming, alliteration and letter naming fluency.[4]

Reading books aloud with children every day not only builds language and pre-literacy skills, but exposes them to new ideas, builds their social/emotional and problem solving skills and inspires them to become life long learners.

- Shared reading between a parent or caregiver and a toddler is a practice widely recommended to promote language development[5] and can affect the development of oral language skills and print knowledge.[6]
- Greater impact in literacy skills is seen when readers engage children in dialogic reading—using conversation and questions to allow the child to develop a story.[7]

A barrier for many families is simply a lack of books or little access to books. Children in middle-income families have virtually unlimited access to books, while children growing up in poverty struggle to access any books, whether personally owned or borrowed from the library.[8] For example, one study found that during the summer between kindergarten and first grade, only 46% of low socioeconomic status children went to a library, compared with 80% of high socioeconomic status children.[9]

Organizational and volunteer efforts can help bring more books to families. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which provides books every month to children birth to age five in low-income homes, has seen significant impact in literacy development through providing books to children, when parents actually read with children on a regular basis. As a result of access to books, parents report reading to their children more frequently and evaluations have affirmed that children who participated in Imagination Library were better prepared than children who had not. Almost half of kindergarten and 64% of pre-kindergarten teachers surveyed say that children enrolled in Imagination Library performed better than expected in class.[10]

Dolly's Library In Middletown Finds Significant Impact On Families

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has had a positive impact on Middletown, OH families who have chosen to participate, a report from the Middletown Community Foundation found.

The report utilized responses solicited from parents whose children had been in the local chapter of the international literacy program for the previous 12 to 18 months. Among other findings, the report showed:

- ❒ Nearly 82% of parents reported that after enrolling in the program they increased the frequency with which they read to their children. When looking at families with low income households only, this number increased to 98%.

- ❒ 92% of parents indicated their child's level of excitement and enthusiasm about books increased after they started receiving Imagination Library volumes in the mail. This increased to 95% for low-income children.

- ❒ Nearly 97% of children were more interested in books after registering for the program than they were before. This figure was 100% for children living in low income households.

- ❒ 90% of children ask their parents to read to them more now than they did before the books began arriving. It increased to 97% when looking at low income households only.

- ❒ New students in the Middletown City School District who had participated in the program for between one and nine months scored on average 4.2% higher on their kindergarten entrance literacy assessments than those who had not received any books from the project.

- ❒ Imagination Library books made up the majority of children's books in the homes of nearly one-third of low income households among participants, compared to about one-sixth of mid-to-upper income homes.

United Way of King County: Volunteer Reader Program

United Way of King County's Volunteer Reader Program mobilizes volunteers from the Seattle-area business community to read aloud to children in preschools, Head Start programs and child care centers throughout King County. Through one-to-one read aloud experiences, the program creates caring relationships and builds early literacy skills by introducing preschoolers to the joys of reading. The program has reached 3,000 children, age three to five, with 135 volunteers in 40 sites.

The Volunteer Reader Program was started to engage the community in preparing children for school by bringing additional support to child care/preschool programs that haven't previously used volunteers to support literacy work - in part because they did not have time to provide appropriate levels of volunteer engagement.

Characteristics of Effective Reading: A Summary

1. Six variables have an impact on literacy development before a child is six years old:

- Alphabet knowledge—knowing the names of letters and corresponding sounds.
- Phonetic awareness—detecting and using sounds in spoken language.
- Rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or numbers—naming a random sequence of letters quickly.
- RAN of objects or colors—naming a random sequence of pictures of objects or colors quickly.
- Writing a specific letter when asked or writing one's name.
- Phonological memory—remembering spoken information for a short period of time.[11]

2. Volunteers, parents and teachers can help nurture literacy skills in children up to five years old by carrying out activities that allow children to:

- Identify and say the names of printed letters.
- Identify the sounds associated with letters.
- Break spoken words into smaller pieces and manipulate these sounds.
- Remember spoken information.
- Understand how the mechanics of print work.[12]

3. Volunteers, parents and teachers can aid literacy development by:

- Reading books to children that expose them to rich vocabulary.
- Asking children to explain what is happening during a story or in a picture.
- Having conversations with children in which they practice new vocabulary and concepts.
- Structuring conversations with children to allow them to use and manipulate sounds and letters.
- Teaching children to ask questions—especially with "wh"- words (e.g. what, when).
- Helping children learn to make comparisons.
- Developing grammatical knowledge, using vocabulary in context.
- Showing children how to read so that they understand how print works.
- Asking children to tell a story and writing it down for them.[13]

VOLUNTEER TUTORS

Some children and youth experience difficulty developing academic competencies required for success in school, work and life.[14] These difficulties may emerge from a number of personal, instructional and societal factors. In an effort to improve academic achievement in youth, there has been an increase in programs that provide additional educational support. Increasingly, these efforts include after-school, (and sometimes during-school) tutoring programs.

Tutoring—instructing a child one-on-one or in small groups—has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, especially with at-risk children experiencing reading problems.[15] The literacy skills and academic supports that children and young people receive through tutoring solidify their efforts toward high school, college and career success.

Tutoring models fall into three basic categories:

- In *instructional tutoring,* the tutor provides instruction on a specific content area, where students are expected to develop new knowledge and become proficient in topics that were previously unmastered.[16]
- In the *assignment assistance tutoring* model, tutors meet with individuals or small groups who have difficulty completing class assignments and support them in specific tasks.[17]
- In the *strategic tutoring* model, a combination of the other two, tutors support students in completing assigned class work while helping them understand how to learn and apply strategic processes.[18]

Challenges to measuring the impacts of tutoring are significant. Interventions often lack clear programmatic definitions of tutoring and its components. Depending on the type of tutoring program, specific outcomes can also range from acquiring new skills to increasing homework assignment completion - and comparing data across these areas can be difficult.[19]

Heart of West Michigan United Way: Schools of Hope

The Heart of West Michigan United Way is zeroing in on first through third graders in its most disadvantaged neighborhoods.

That's because children are learning to read through third grade; by fourth grade they are reading to learn. Kids who read well are more likely to graduate, and succeed in college, work and life. The Grand Rapids community, including school districts, have come together around 900 young students who need the most help. Some 1,200 community volunteers – including college students and retirees – work one-on-one with kids in schools for 30 minutes a week. More than 60 companies give employees paid time off to mentor. Congregations host after-school and family literacy programs.

It's working. Students in the Schools of Hope program are making greater reading gains than their peers. And those in the afterschool program are gaining one and a half years worth of academic growth in just nine months.

In addition to the partnership with the school district, United Way has partnered with five colleges where education professors have built tutoring requirements into the course syllabi. Many students continue to volunteer as tutors even after the semester ends, with the United Way maintaining a majority of the volunteers.

Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery is a successful, typically in-school, tutoring program used in approximately 6000 schools. Reading Recovery is a short-term one-on-one tutoring intervention for first grade students who score in the bottom 20% on reading tests. Generally conducted as pull-out sessions during the school day, the tutoring is conducted by trained Reading Recovery teachers for 30 minutes daily over 12–20 weeks. Reading Recovery is a time-tested program that has moderate to large positive effects on students' general reading achievement and is the highest rated program of its kind, according to What Works Clearinghouse.[58]

What the Research Says

Some Experience Corps and AmeriCorps programs have underscored the power of tutoring to enhance learning outcomes. Elementary school students who participated in Experience Corps have demonstrated significant improvements over the course of the academic year on standardized testing. Program results were often stronger when children received at least 35 Experience Corps tutoring sessions.[20]

The benefits of one-on-one adult tutoring are exemplified by AmeriCorps tutoring programs, which have produced academic achievements in reading as well as improvements in classroom behavior over the course of tutoring engagements.[21] In one AmeriCorps intervention that worked with nearly 900 struggling first to third graders in schools across the country, students achieved at or near grade level reading skills over the course of the school year. Reading gains occurred for students regardless of ethnicity or gender.[22]

Other investigations have found that an after-school tutoring program in which low-achieving second and third grade children were tutored for one hour twice weekly by university students, retirees and suburban mothers generated strong improvements in the tutees' reading skills. Half of the tutored children made a one year gain in reading while only 20% of the comparison group children did. Peer tutoring has also shown some positive gains: elementary school students tutored by older peers tended to outperform the randomly assigned control group who was not tutored.[23]

Tutoring can be an effective intervention for children and youth, but it is critical that tutors be used effectively. Several characteristics can improve the effectiveness of tutoring:

- Programs can develop guidelines for volunteer implementation.
- Programs can also analyze the role tutors can play and develop a robust training program geared towards the needs of the tutors and the students.[24]

Although individuals without subject expertise can be helpful tutors, teachers and highly trained instructional aides can be extremely effective, particularly when the program is structured with tutor manuals, student materials and training procedures. However, the additional training involved in developing highly structured programs can be cost prohibitive for many school districts and communities.[25]

Characteristics of Effective Tutoring: A Summary

1. When applied in unison, the following practices are most likely to increase reading scores.[26]

- Tutoring sessions are frequent, with at least three sessions a week.
- Program evaluation occurs throughout the program.
- Tutors receive training prior to and during the tutoring program.

2. The relationship between tutor and student is significantly associated with reading gains. Students who form good relationships with tutors may feel more positively about relationships with teachers and parents.[27]

3. Program effects are strongest when tutoring occurs more than 25 times in a school year.[28]

4. Tutor expertise and development of instructional skills are essential to improving the nature of tutoring interactions at elementary, secondary and post secondary levels. Even subject experts benefit from tutor training.[29]

5. Capitalizing on the professional and/or subject expertise of educators or instructional aides can significantly advance achievement outcomes in tutoring programs.[30]

6. A diagnostic/developmental template should be used to organize the tutoring program for each student. [31]

7. Formal and informal assessment needs to occur for each student to guide the tutoring process, and tutors should track the progress of students in order to adjust their content and strategy instruction.[32]

8. Program success is stronger when teachers and tutors collaborate and when programs are structured around principles of learning.[33]

VOLUNTEER MENTORS

Children and youth need more than academic supports to make it through high school successfully. They need caring adults in their lives to support and guide them through the early years. Parents are a foundational resource to their children, but other adults can provide support as well by becoming a mentor. Adult mentors may provide emotional support, guidance that enhances a child's self-esteem, foster self-control and advice that many teens may be uncomfortable in seeking from their parents. Building these kinds of relationships is particularly important for at-risk youth from struggling homes or low-income neighborhoods which frequently offer few role models or positive outlets for young people.[34]

United Way of Allegheny County: Be A 6th Grade Mentor

Be A 6th Grade Mentor (BA6GM) is an initiative through United Way of Allegheny County in partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern Pennsylvania - under the leadership of the Youth Futures Commission.

Currently, BA6GM serves 270 mentor/mentee matches in eight Pittsburgh Public Middle Schools with supports provided by local mentoring agency partners—Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Pittsburgh, Communities In Schools of Pittsburgh/ Allegheny County, the Mt. Ararat Community Activity Center and World-Class Industrial Network.

BA6GM is part of United Way of Allegheny County's Motivating Kids to Succeed in School and Preventing Youth Violence Initiatives. Leaders agreed that a school-based mentoring program would improve educational success and increase community involvement in schools.

Why the focus on sixth grade? Local research indicated that students who ended sixth grade with multiple off-track indicators were at significant risk of dropping out and that if these off-track indicators were addressed during the middle grades, students became far more likely to graduate.

BA6GM's goal is to help sixth graders develop career aspirations that encourage academic excellence and ultimately, eligibility for the school district's Pittsburgh Promise scholarship for post-secondary education.

MENTOR's "Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring" is the research base guiding program design, including practices such as a one-year minimum commitment and weekly meetings.

In one year of implementation, the evaluation showed positive impacts, including:

- ❒ Over 97% of mentees trust their mentors.
- ❒ 95% of mentees say mentors encouraged them to work harder in school.
- ❒ 76% of mentees said mentoring helped them look forward to going to school.
- ❒ 75% of mentees said mentoring helped them work harder on their homework and class work.

What the Research Says

Mentoring can take a number of forms and include varying goals and outcomes. Some mentoring takes place within the school (like Communities in Schools), while other mentors work with children in the community, through programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters. Objectives run the gamut, from focusing on academic achievement, school retention to job preparation, substance abuse prevention and avoiding socially inappropriate behaviors.[35] Community-based mentoring and school-based mentoring have similar objectives around youth success, achievement and self-esteem.

With only 20% of a students' time spent in school, out-of-school time serves as an integral part of a child's education. Children and youth learn in many aspects of life, so a community web of social, cultural, education and economic resources should be in place to encourage learning. Both community and school-based mentoring have been shown to improve different outcomes for children and youth. Viewed in this way, United Way's call to action—Give, Advocate and Volunteer—is a call for strengthening community resources that support children and youth of all ages within and outside of the school environment.

As United Ways look to expand or create new mentoring initiatives across the county, giving careful consideration to the resources available within the community is critical. While school-based mentoring is increasing in popularity, connecting students with the resources they need to be successful both in and out of school is essential—and community-based mentoring can be used to fill the spaces where children and youth lack supports.

Community and school-based mentoring models have varied price tags, as student to mentor ratio may vary and meeting space may or may not be provided. Depending on the type of program and length of the intervention, both community and school-based mentoring can cost roughly $1000 per student per school year.[36]

In2Books: eMentoring

In2Books is a literacy-based eMentoring program that connects caring adult volunteers with third to fifth grade students from under-resourced communities.

From September to June, students and their adult pen pals read up to five books selected by the students and exchange ideas about the important issues in the books via online letters during class time.

Recent evaluations of In2Books found that students scored significantly better when participating in the program: [59]

❒ Students who used In2Books in second through fourth grades scored significantly higher on standardized reading tests than students in the district who did not.

❒ Students whose teachers had used In2Books for two or more years scored significantly higher in reading than non-In2Books students.

❒ Schools that continued program implementation, so that students had the experience at more than one grade level, got more robust developmental growth patterns in letter writing quality than schools where students had only a one-year experience in the program.

❒ In2Books students were more likely to have improved in higher-level thinking skills than comparison students. This finding was confirmed during teacher evaluations: teachers expressed that In2Books had a strong and positive effect on students' higher level thinking skills.

About Community-Based Mentoring

As academic achievement is critical to socioeconomic success, a number of traditional **community-based mentoring** programs emphasize the improvement of academic and cognitive skills in youth. Youth engaged in community-based mentoring often have more positive attitudes toward school. One review of ten community-based mentoring programs found that:[37]

- Attendance of students improved dramatically, with mentees missing 50% fewer days of school than non-mentored students.
- Likelihood of initiating drug use decreased by 46%.
- Youth from minority groups were 70% less likely to initiate drug use than similar youth not involved in the program.

Disadvantaged youth seem to benefit the most from mentoring. These youth come from communities with the most limited resources and from families that are often not available to their children. As a result of their mentoring relationship, academic performance improved significantly and likelihood to enroll in college also increased.[38]

Many successful mentoring programs take a whole-child approach to youth development – youth may receive mentoring in life skills, emotional support, job training or academic skills-building. Other mentoring programs incorporate home visiting to both parents and youth in order to enhance the effects of mentoring.[39]

Over 90% of community and school-based mentors have reported feelings of closeness with their mentees, but it is critical to note that community-based mentors more often reported feeling very close to their mentees. Around 45% of community-based mentors versus 32% of school-based mentors indicated feeling very close to their mentees.[40]

About School-Based Mentoring

School-based mentoring has become more common as schools are seen as hubs for social, physiological and health services. In addition to the increase in centralized school supports, the federal law No Child Left Behind increased pressure on schools to raise academic outcomes. Funding for community-based initiatives without a direct line to academic achievement has decreased, while school-based mentoring tied to increased academic performance has grown.[41] These programs typically have objectives around academic achievement and school related behavior.

Benefits to school-based mentoring are varied, in that the commitment on the part of the mentor is often more predictable and structured. In addition, school-based mentoring allows mentors to work with a harder to reach segment of at-risk youth, since the requirements for parental involvement are reduced in these matches. These matches also tend to be more manageable for organizations, as less staff time needs to be devoted to screenings, supervision and ensuring mentee safety.[42] While reaching students who are often under-resourced, school-based mentoring also reaches mentors that often are not engaged in mentoring: the school setting allows older students to mentor younger students while in the structure of a school setting.[43]

School administrators may hesitate to pursue school-based mentoring initiatives due to limited results pointing straight to academic achievement, but it is critical to note that the reduction in truancy alone makes mentoring a very feasible strategy or increasing academic performance. Students are more likely to be in school on days that they meet with their mentor and have increased attendance overall as a result. In addition, increases in scholastic efficacy, social and emotional learning, positive social behavior and a decrease in school misconduct provide strong support for the implementation of school-based mentoring.[44]

While school-based programs are growing in popularity, this growth has outpaced the research and data systems to determine the most effective mentoring practices within the school. Taking a mix of approaches, tailored to the students needs, is key in achieving success in school-based mentoring programs.[45] Preliminary data around school-based mentoring provides evidence that it can work under the right circumstances, but further investigation and comparable data systems are necessary to show what practices are most effective for students.

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley: Math, Science and Technology Initiative

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley's Math, Science and Technology initiative (MSTi) is a community partnership that engages kids in the sciences through hands-on learning in afterschool programs and at local science and tech companies. The initiative supports science curricula in afterschool programs and connects students, through site visits and mentoring programs, to local science-based companies.

The initiative has grown significantly in recent years, doubling its size over two years to engage 1,300 youth. MSTi also evolved from engaging eight-12-year olds to kids from kindergarten up through twelfth grade. The program also recently expanded to include peer mentoring, with high school students working with the youngest children in sciences.

By partnering with local science-related companies and afterschool programs, United Way works to bring science beyond the classroom and help youth envision careers that can transform their lives.

Characteristics of Effective Mentoring: A Summary

1. Effective mentoring relations tend to have a longer duration, and short-term matches may be more harmful than helpful.[47]

2. The interests and desires of the youth drive the mentoring program, making it more likely to succeed.[48]

3. Factors that can limit mentor participation are taken into account when matching them with mentees, such as scheduling conflicts, transportation, limited funds for activities, work or school commitments.[49]

4. In school-based mentoring, program planners consider which model will work for students individually and under the specific circumstances.[50]

5. Mentors are well trained—more hours of training tends to produce longer lasting matches[46] and encourage mentors to take on a second year of mentoring.[51]

6. Mentors stick to mentoring and allow the student to dictate the kinds of activities that they do together—attempting to tutor or parent the student may lead to disengagement.[52]

7. Time is managed carefully in school-based mentoring—limited engagement due to school-based settings can be detrimental to the match.[53]

8. Mentors are recruited and trained prior to the start of the school year, which can allow mentors and mentees to meet more times during the school year.[54]

9. Mentors are trained on how to end a match effectively.[55]

10. Mentors maintaining contact with mentees throughout the summer strengthen the relationship and increase the likelihood that the mentor will sign on for another year of mentoring after the summer has ended.[56]

11. Costs must be weighed with the type of services being provided and the population being served when determining a program's potential value.[57]

CONCLUSIONS

The challenge is real, but United Ways are well positioned to meet this Education Volunteer Call to Action. The evidence is clear—volunteers can pave the way to high school graduation by reading with preschoolers, tutoring students who need extra help and mentoring young people who need a caring adult in their lives. Volunteer reading, tutoring and mentoring initiatives – when designed with the student's needs in mind – can make a real impact on academic achievement. The length of the program, frequency of meetings and program evaluation are critical to program success. Initial and ongoing training are essential in ensuring that volunteers are well equipped to help move the needle on high school dropout numbers.

United Ways across the country can join the effort to recruit one million education volunteers in our communities. With expertise in recruiting volunteers and our foundations in early childhood development, United Way is uniquely equipped to work with volunteers to cut the high school dropout numbers in half by 2018.

Learn more on our website:
liveunited.org/volunteer

NOTES

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