

A Teacher's Guide To THE WATERBURY MENTOR PROGRAM

WHAT IS THE MENTOR PROGRAM? The Mentor Program pairs caring volunteer adults from the community and local businesses together with students who are not doing as well in school as they could be doing. The Mentor becomes a friend, a confidant, and a positive role model for the child. The goal of the program is to enhance student self-esteem, to improve attendance, and to prevent future drop-outs through intervention at an early age.

IS THIS A NEW PROGRAM? The Waterbury Mentor Program was started in September of 1992 at Driggs School and at Washington School. It was developed in cooperation between the Waterbury Public Schools, Northeast Utilities, and the business sector, through the assistance of the Greater Waterbury Chamber of Commerce, as a part of the Partners In Education program. The very successful Mentor Program in Norwalk, Connecticut served as a model.

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM WORK? The Mentor is assigned to a specific student, based upon the needs of that student, the availability of the volunteer Mentor, and common interests as determined by a student and volunteer profile. For example, a child who has a strong interest in computers will be matched up with an adult who also has a strong interest in computers. The Mentor and child will then meet once each week, for one hour, during the school day and on school grounds. During that one hour session, the Mentor and student may talk, play games, walk around the school, or read. Occasionally, the Mentor may assist the student with homework or other activities, but this will be by mutual agreement. In general, the mentor is to be viewed as an adult friend and not as a teacher and certainly not as a second parent. The program works because the Mentor becomes another source of caring adult support for that child.

HOW ARE MENTORS SELECTED? Individuals from the community and from local businesses who are interested in volunteering in our schools are given several ways to help out, including the Mentor Program. Those who are interested in mentoring fill out an application telling us about their work history, their interests, and why they would like to join the program. The program coordinator conducts an interview with the individual, then does a background and reference check. Suitable candidates then undergo a training session and an orientation session.

WHAT CHILDREN ARE RECOMMENDED FOR THE PROGRAM AND BY WHOM? Children are recommended for the program by teachers, the Principal, or other support staff of the school. They are selected based upon the staff's observations of that child and the feeling that the program would benefit him or her. There are nearly as many reasons for recommending a child for the program as there are children in the program. Some children are chosen because they're doing "B" or "C" work when the teacher suspects they could do "A" work with a little more encouragement, and some children are chosen because they are shy or appear uncomfortable about raising their hands in class. Other children come from large families and would benefit from a little one-on-one time with an adult, while other students may be recommended because they come from single parent households and would enjoy the attention of an adult male (or female when it's the father who has custody). Some children are very active, others may have some behavior problems. Some of the children that are recommended for the program are very bright and the extra attention helps provide them with additional learning opportunities. With older students (in the middle schools), a Mentor may assist in career planning. In all instances, the staff should feel the child would benefit from the extra adult attention.

HOW DO I SIGN UP A CHILD FOR THE PROGRAM? First, discuss the child's situation with the Principal. If the Principal agrees the program might be beneficial to the child, please fill out a "Teacher / Support Staff Request for a Mentor" form. The form asks for the reasons why the child may benefit from the program, family relationships of interest to a Mentor, the student's interests or hobbies, and any recommended strategies (talking, reading, etc.) When the form is completed, it should be returned by inter-office mail to Nancy Vaughan, PIE, 30 Church Street.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I WILL HAVE TO DO? We ask that you meet briefly with the Mentor at least three times each year to discuss the child's progress (September, January, May). Of course, you can meet more often if you prefer.

HOW SOON WILL THE CHILD BE ASSIGNED A MENTOR? That depends on a number of factors, including the current availability of Mentors interested in volunteering at your school, the challenge presented by the child, and any special requirements. For example, there is a high demand for male role models for boys growing up in single parent households, but not nearly enough male mentors to fill the need. That doesn't mean you shouldn't sign up the child, only that it may take a while to find a match.

WHAT WILL THE MENTOR AND CHILD TALK ABOUT? Actually, that's pretty much up to the child. Initially, the Mentor and child will share information about each other, just the way you would exchange information with a new neighbor or a new colleague at work. The Mentor may work from an activity book especially designed for Mentor Programs. The book, Mirror, Mirror On The Wall, guides the Mentor and child through a self-discovery process. Activities include discussions about family, favorite activities, favorite foods, and favorite books, games, story writing, "tell what's wrong" pictures, and tongue twisters. The Mentor and child will likely spend a lot of their time together reading and playing games. Eventually, as the child and mentor get to know one another better, Mentors often find what the child most wants to do is talk. Usually, the conversations are about school, school work and friends.

WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY? Mentors are told to respect the confidentiality of any conversation the child may have with them. Unless the Mentor feels the child is in danger, what is said between child and Mentor stays with the child and the Mentor.

HOW WILL THE CHILD BENEFIT FROM THIS TYPE OF PROGRAM? Some of the signs of success are improved attendance, increased communication with friends or teachers, smiling, greater enthusiasm for school, improved attitudes, and improved grades. An independent study of children in similar mentoring programs show that these children are:

- less likely to try drugs or alcohol
- less likely to get into physical fights
- less likely to skip school
- more likely to do better in school behaviorally and academically
- and have better parent and peer relationships that they would without Mentors

IS THERE ANY STIGMA ATTACHED TO THIS TYPE OF PROGRAM? Truthfully, the child may find his or her classmates are envious! They'll want a Mentor, too.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILD'S SCHOOL WORK? WOULDN'T IT BE BETTER IF HE (SHE) STAYED IN CLASS? We work with the teacher in determining the best time for the Mentor to visit. The benefits of the program far outweigh any lost classroom time.

HOW LONG WILL THE CHILD BE IN THE PROGRAM? The Mentor has agreed to stay with the child for at least one year, unless circumstances change dramatically. Ideally, the Mentor will continue seeing the child as long as it is beneficial. Sometimes the Mentor has to withdraw due to personal reasons (such as a change in jobs), and sometimes the child decides to withdraw (perhaps as he enters middle or high school).

WHAT ABOUT THE SUMMER? Officially, the program ends when school lets out for summer vacation and restarts in the fall, shortly after the children return to school, but some Mentors and children set up a pen pal program for the summer months, with the parent's permission, of course.

DO ALL SCHOOLS PARTICIPATE? Right now, all elementary schools and middle schools are eligible to participate, but not all elementary schools actually have Mentors, due to a shortage of volunteers. There are many more children who would benefit from a Mentor than there are Mentors.