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## The American Education System's Guidance Plan

Geraod Taylor, age eleven, attending Chicago public school, eagerly rushes to the library at the end of every school day to meet his brother-like mentor. Many children like Gerod, living in underprivileged inner-city neighborhoods, grow up with fathers in and out of jail or completely absent fathers. For these children mentoring is crucial for their development; Nationally, mentoring programs continue to prove how beneficial they are to kids growing up without proper guidance or chance of opportunity. Behavior, social skills, emotional well-being, responsibility, and academic skills of at-risk elementary students drastically improve after taking part in mentoring programs and it is important to acknowledge just how much these programs can impact a child's life. All of these improvements are interrelated, as one aspect of a student's life improves it creates a domino leading to more improvements. After observing the correlation, most mentoring programs now attempt to create other focuses on top of academic development in order to benefit the students as much as possible. As a result of the positive outcomes mentoring has on kids, programs are expanding throughout the United States. Across the nation, mentoring programs have proved to benefit all aspects of life for young children substantially, specifically at-risk children coming from low-income/inner-city households.

The most crucial part of a mentoring program stems from its volunteers. In order for students to reap the benefits of mentoring programs, they must have an appropriate mentor with whom they are able to trust and become close to. Studies show that benefits are the greatest when the relationship between mentor and mentee lasts around or greater than twelve months (Borden 3). This amount of time validates a build of trust with the mentor and strong bond. If a student does not enjoy their time during mentoring or does not build a relationship with their mentor, there are no incentives for the student to be involved or to work on their skills. A strong foundation must be built for the students' trust and for them to put in their best effort into the mentoring program. Many studies have shown that the closer the student is to their mentor, the more they will improve. Specifically, a study performed by Amanda Bayer and the MDRC (Building Knowledge to Improve Social Policy) found a direct correlation between academic performance, quality of work, attendance, and completion of school work all to the kind of relationship the student had with their mentor. In this study done with the Big Brothers Big Sisters foundation, 75.6 percent of the 225 kids reported feeling close to a mentor. This connection is so crucial; The data showed that the kids with a close connection to their mentor had the highest rankings in improvement in all areas being observed. It is also very important to take into account that children are the subjects being mentored and adults, not including familiar adults, could possibly be intimidating or "scary" for young kids. Choosing an appropriate mentor with which kids are able to connect to and trust is so important for this reason in addition to the correlation to improvement.

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Mentoring has shown to largely improve students' behavior, at home, in school, and in public. Before being introduced to mentoring, children in socioeconomically deprived neighborhoods often misbehaved from lack of guidance and negative influences around them. It is common for these kids to become involved in violence, along with drug and alcohol abuse. Behavior is learned from observing one's parents so many children with unhealthy families or families involved in violence or crime end up that way when they are older. The kids see it as their only option as a result from constantly being surrounded by the negative behaviors and so they will quickly pick the behaviors up themselves. Mentoring allows different (positive) influences to show the children that they have different paths accessible to them in life. For example, the Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin included the findings of the Bruce and Bridgeland meta-analysis in 2014 which said "mentoring programs showed that children at risk who have been mentored are more likely to aspire for a postsecondary education compared to those at-risk children who have not participated in a mentoring program (76% vs. 55%)" (Angus 31). When kids have the proper guidance they learn to avoid the path of drug and alcohol abuse, and violent behaviors. When staying out of trouble they are able to focus on more important aspects of their lives leading them to success later on and inspiring them to pursue higher education. This is a result of first hand observation of their mentor's behavior and how the mentor treats the child. Big Brothers Big Sisters programs also observed these results:

"The results indicated that "littles" (mentees) who met with their "bigs" (mentors) regularly for about a year were 46% less likely than the control group to start using illegal drugs, 27% less likely to start drinking, 52% less likely to skip a day of school, and 37% less likely to skip a class" (Keating 717)

At first glance, these statistics may seem minute, but when observing the number of kids from inner city neighborhoods who take part in these behaviors, the reality is the percentages are actually very significant. When the kids meet with their mentor consistently and build a close connection they are less likely to take part in the poor behaviors listed. With this close connection the kids are more likely to follow advice given to them by their mentor and also learn the rewards for acting appropriately.

Another case where mentoring has improved students' actions is with altruistic behavior. Many students will subconsciously or consciously take in their mentor's nurturing behavior. When spending a significant amount of time with a person consistently, behaviors are very easily learned. This is exactly what happens with children in mentoring programs, especially if their mentor is someone they look up to. A mentor stated, "one of the mothers observed that after the program started, her son became more attentive and nurturing toward younger nieces and nephews. In some instances, the student and student's mother began participating in volunteer work in the school and community" (Ellis 32). Because of the son being mentored and seeing the way his mentor acts towards him, he (either consciously or subconsciously) chooses to treat

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his younger nieces and nephews the same way. As for helping the community, the feeling of relief and gratitude from being helped frequently can very well influence how much someone is willing to help someone else and pass along that feeling. Behavior is just one small aspect of life improved by mentoring, yet social skills also improve greatly.

The trusting, strong relationships that students make with their mentors influence the kids to become more social with others. Typically, as a result from opening up to the mentor and participating in social events, the kids will be more likely to open up to their classmates as well. For example, the mentoring program at Lady of The Lake University in Texas takes the elementary students to the university, on field trips, or they play games (Ellis 46). These events help the students practice their social skills and develop stronger skills. During the field trips or events, students make more friends and keeps them socializing, as opposed to solitarily sitting through school and going home to an empty house when school is over. When a child is frequently neglected they do not have opportunities to socialize which can impair them socially as they grow older. This was also seen with Goldblatt Elementary School in Chicago. Without much social interaction at home from their absent parents the young boys see their mentor as a father figure. From meeting with him daily, the boys become more engaged in being social and it helps them talk about things they may not necessarily be able to talk about while at home (Vevea). It is also observed that when kids return home to their families they are more trusting, and are able to interact/communicate with their parents better. This is a very common result found in youth development and most mentoring programs are veering to this approach (incorporating more social activities, not only academic help in a school setting). The improvement in social skills directly affects a child's emotional and mental well-being, improvement with social life often directly correlates with emotional well-being. The previous benefits of mentoring mentioned go hand-in-hand with improved self-esteem and emotional well-being. When a student lacks a proper role model or has an absent parent, they frequently lack the support to help them believe in themselves. They might be prone to often feeling judged or as if they may not account to much in life because of the lack of encouragement. Mentoring fills this void by providing a role model who is constantly supporting and encouraging their mentee. With the constant support the students become more self-confident. Studies and feedback prove this to be true. A fifth grader who went through a mentoring program at her school exclaimed "It makes me feel proud of myself, and she's (the mentor) proud too" (Ellis 52). It is also apparent that the girl is more content along with being confident. Mentors offer consistent encouragement and rewards for when the students do well or improve. This makes the kids want to keep doing well because they gain so much satisfaction with their work when they are rewarded.

When observing social engagement in addition to encouragement, many students make new friends, become more involved, and participate in more events, also leading to improved mental well-being. With more friends the child's support system grows, they feel less alone, and they

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enjoy participating in more activities. Another example of this is from the mentoring program for young boys in Chicago. The group of young boys are paired up with Mr. Boyd who played college basketball and after college entered into a successful career specializing in education and restorative justice. Mr. Boyd frequently discusses the meaning of success and passes along skills on how to be successful in their lives. Having a man like Mr. Boyd as their mentor inspires the boys and gives them reassurance that they too are able to achieve success. One of his mentees, ten-year-old Everett Spraggs states “Just talking about success makes us want to be successful” (Vevea). Young Everett may have never said or thought anything remotely like this quote if it wasn’t for mentoring. It is incredibly crucial that students are aware that they have the ability to escape their underprivileged lives and not end up in and out of jail like many of their fathers. With reassurance the students gradually regain confidence and their dream appears to be more of a reality in their minds as they regain confidence. The Prime Mentors of Canada also has this approach. When a student is matched with their mentor, they design and conduct a project about a topic chosen by the student. The benefits on confidence are explained in the report:

“The experience of developing a project alongside his or her mentor is intended to replace the support and motivation that may be missing in the child’s home. Such support may then spark an interest in the children to continue their educations and achieve their creative potential rather than selecting a path that does not include postsecondary education” (Angus 32).

Projects conducted in mentoring programs like this one allow the student to practice their presentation and allows them to stay focused on their interests. They learn to talk in front of their peers and also stay motivated with their topic. This drastically improves the students’ confidence, mainly in the classroom but also allows them to be confident in their interests. Although all of these benefits are crucial to youth development, the original reasoning for mentoring sparked from the need for improvement in academics.

Academics is normally the main focus and push for mentoring underprivileged inner-city students. Every other aspect of life has an effect on a student’s academic success. As mentors are able to help improve these other aspects, academic success is also shown to greatly improve. The Prime Mentors of Canada program rewards many scholarships for students based off of their academic success and the students who receive these scholarships continue on to some sort of postsecondary education after their elementary and high school careers. Being an at-risk student means that there is most likely a lack of a financial backbone for the kids. Because of this, many kids will give up school or not know how to stay motivated when they think pursuing a higher education is impossible for them. The Prime Mentors of Canada program and many other programs reward scholarships to give students hope and motivation to continue school. The article states:

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“PM C has awarded 111 scholarships in the last decade or more, and the organization’s data show that 100% of the students who received a scholarship at a young age and completed their high school education went on to pursue postsecondary “ (Angus 32)

This statistic clearly shows how mentoring at a young age can carry on to later in a child’s life, especially in the discussion of whether these kids will attend college. In fact, many children who took part in this program have also been awarded grants and scholarships from major U.S Universities, including ivy league schools. With guidance and tutoring, students learn the skills necessary for academic success. Relating back to the statistics provided by the text, “The Effects of a Mentoring Program on At-Risk Youth” by Keating, children who took part in Big Brother/Big Sister were “52% less likely to skip a day of school, and 37% less likely to skip a class”. Mentoring pushes kids to keep attending school which is crucial for academic success.

Lastly, the same mentoring program run by Mr. Boyd at Goldblatt Elementary School in Chicago has seen drastic success in the area of academics. Mr. Boyd said, “Since the mentoring started, they have shown significant improvement. Four made the honor roll last term, and one, 11-year-old Marzell Wilson, received the Principal’s Scholar award for getting all A’s on his last report card” (Vevea). Although Mr. Boyd only describes one of his mentees success stories. This is a very common trend in mentoring. It is proven by every study observed that the outreach done by mentors to these children and work done in attempt to improve their academics is successful.

I have witnessed many of the benefits firsthand in my own personal experiences with being a mentor. This year I was involved in Auburn’s mentoring club and had the chance to mentor two second grade students at the Early Education center. Every Monday I helped the students learn to read and also became a friend to them and had frequent conversations with them not only surrounding their reading. The student I saw most improvement from is named Tralen. At first I noticed Tralen would get very anxious and had a lot of energy all the time usually leading to a few behavior problems. Along with this he would frequently give up on trying to pronounce words and had many difficulties getting through one of his books. Throughout the semester as Tralen warmed up to me, I noticed he was able to use his energy in more positive ways and his time with me made the start of his week a lot easier. He became less anxious around me and began to open up. These first steps made it a lot easier to help him with reading. By the end of spring semester Tralen’s reading skills drastically improved and he was more willing to try to pronounce the full words without feeling discouraged and giving up. He gained the confidence to read short chapter books where as before, the books consisted of only a short sentence per page. Seeing his improvements firsthand in only a couple semesters makes it so apparent to me how important these programs are for our youth.

In addition to mentoring students at the Auburn Early Education Center I am also a wrestling

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coach/mentor for little boys. Although I am a coach, these boys look up to me as a mentor and the coaching and time spent with them carries on into other aspects of their lives. I am able to coach the boys about twice a week with a handful of other coaches. Having other coaches is very beneficial because it provides more one-on-one time with the boys to focus on their skills and improvement. It also builds a relationship with the kids as I can interact with them frequently. Throughout my experience coaching them I not only see improvement in their wrestling skills but I can also see how close they become with me and the other boys as well. They are also always having fun at practice giving them a healthy break from school.

Proof of the all-around benefits mentoring provides to at-risk elementary students is the rapid growth in programs seen across the country. All of the studies and statistics show a strong lean towards the pros as opposed to cons when evaluating the need/use for mentoring programs in low privileged elementary schools. The benefits are so evident that the United States department of health and human sciences and education puts one-hundred million dollars each year to fund mentoring programs across the nation because of their success (Dubois 58). These funds would not have been approved by government officials if they were not confident in the positives outcomes the programs built off this money would have for youth. There are already 5,000 mentoring programs in the nation just for at-risk children alone (58). This number is very large considering it does not include any other type of mentoring programs. The proof surrounding the success of programs helping at-risk students is overwhelming and based off its growth, the number of programs will only increase.

Underprivileged elementary students all around the nation lack the self-confidence, guidance, and skillset in order to be successful. Mentoring programs show to drastically improve all of the aspects of a child's life. Especially kids without proper guidance coming from broken homes, mentoring can greatly impact their well-being and over success in their path of education and life skill in general. Yet the mentoring may take place early in their lives, the effects are long-term and open up pathways they might have only been able to dream about. Although these aspects are different, they must all fit together and correlate with one another when evaluating a student's development and success. This direct correlation links all of the programs together and it is highly important that one acknowledges this. It is also impossible to ignore the rapid growth of programs developing across the nation, proving that mentoring truly does have a strong, beneficial impact on youth. Programs must continue in order to prepare and aid next generations for their futures.

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