



U.S. Department of Education ■ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Mentoring Resource Center



CASE STUDIES IN YOUTH MENTORING

Partnership Growing Pains

Creative Solutions for Strengthening School-Community Collaborations

Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Paso
and the Canutillo Independent School District

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Introduction

Effective partnerships between community-based organizations and schools are a critical element of high-quality, successful after-school programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Such partnerships combine the academic focus of the school with the community-based organization's developmental approach to helping youth build a range of competencies. They can also maximize community resources and expand opportunities for obtaining new funding.

School-based mentoring programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education experience many benefits from strong partnerships between schools and community organizations. School-based mentoring programs usually operate within a school setting and are intended to complement and enhance the child's experience during the school day. Youth are encouraged to apply what they learn in school to real-life situations and activities. They have opportunities to learn new skills, engage in new activities, and receive praise and support from an adult or older peer who is not a teacher. These new experiences, in turn, help the young person feel more confident in school and more interested in learning.

The National Collaboration for Youth recently released a set of elements of successful collaborations to help programs develop and maintain effective partnerships (2004). Based on literature reviews of after-school program research and the results of surveys from selected after-school program sites, elements that are particularly relevant for school-based mentoring programs include:

- Shared vision and decision making among all partners
- Clear communication structure with regular opportunities for open discussion among partners
- Key stakeholders involved from the beginning in program planning
- Clear roles and responsibilities grounded in the planning process and put in writing
- Consensus on clear goals and a method for measuring success of the partnership

- Realistic timelines to accomplish goals that take into account partners' responsibilities outside the collaboration

Developing partnerships based on these important elements of collaboration provide the strongest possible foundation for success. Unfortunately, partnerships are frequently built quickly, in response to a pressing and immediate need or a significant funding opportunity that cannot be passed by. The initial foundations may be shaky, with agreements not fully developed and original goals lost in the details of implementation. Program leaders may be left struggling throughout the life of the project to make the partnership do what it was intended to do: maximize resources to reach a common mission and improve the lives of youth being served.

Partnerships between mentoring organizations and school districts can be especially challenging, as two very different types of organizations come together to provide services. Issues of structure, policy, commitment, and even agreement on primary outcomes may impede progress. This case study offers an example of how one partnership survived its early growing pains and worked to build a successful and strong collaboration.

Program Description

Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Paso is a relatively new BBBS affiliate. At the time the agency opened its doors in 2000, El Paso was the largest city in the United States without a formal mentoring program. The community it serves faces significant and persistent problems that present barriers to its youth and families, including rural isolation, high poverty rates, a high rate of single parenting, and lack of employment opportunities. El Paso County has an Hispanic population of 81 percent, and more than half of all families in some areas of the county speak a language other than English in the home. Gang involvement, underage use of alcohol and illicit drugs, teen pregnancy, and juvenile justice involvement among youth are among the highest in the state.

The need for a mentoring program to help this community's youth overcome these barriers was clear, and BBBS of El Paso quickly mobilized support to develop a vibrant program. Early funders were the state of Texas Department of Protective Services and the Criminal Justice Division. In the agency's second year, school-based mentoring was initiated through a federal grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, soon followed by support from the largest local school district under Title I and Texas Education Agency funding. These funds formed the initial building blocks for the agency's school-based mentoring services but did not allow program expansion, especially in rural areas outside the city of El Paso where the need was particularly great.

In 2003, the Canutillo Independent School District approached the agency to initiate a new partnership to provide mentors for at-risk children in their district. Canutillo Independent School District serves a rural area outside El Paso, where the average annual household income is \$7,800. All students in the district are Title I eligible, and more than 70 percent of youth reside in single-parent households. The district is composed of 93 percent Hispanic youth, 37 percent of whom have limited English proficiency. Schools in the district struggle to help students resist such pervasive problems as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, gang involvement, and violence. The community has little industry and no public transportation, recreation centers, or medical clinics. Access to services is therefore extremely limited, and the school district acts as a primary focal point for the community, providing emergency relief services and other forms of support for residents.

The two organizations perceived mutual benefits in forming a partnership. The district was interested in bringing mentoring services into their schools and had even formed a mentoring committee to pursue options, but without outside resources these efforts had been largely unsuccessful. Partnering with BBBS of El Paso would allow them to move forward. The BBBS agency was ready to expand its school-based services to include rural, high-needs communities outside El Paso. At the same time, the agency learned that U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools funding would soon be available for school-based mentoring, potentially providing the resources to jump-start such an effort.

Strategies To Build the Partnership

District and agency leadership worked together from the beginning to form a solid partnership, identifying common goals and structures:

- They agreed on a common mission: that providing mentors for struggling students in the school setting would result in positive academic, social, and behavioral outcomes.
- They made commitments to work together to find adequate funding and to develop linkages in the community to recruit mentors and obtain local support.
- One person from each entity was designated as the primary point of contact to begin the communication process. These were the BBBS program director and the district’s social worker.
- A memorandum of understanding was signed between the two agencies, outlining main responsibilities.
- Limited mentoring services were initiated right away despite lack of new funding, using remaining funds from the Juvenile Justice Mentoring Program grant (JUMP) and in-kind support from school staff.

In 2005, BBBS of El Paso successfully obtained a grant from the U.S. Department of Education that would focus its efforts on school-based services in the Canutillo Independent School District and two other districts. With this new funding, it seemed that the partnership’s goals could be fully realized. The program would serve 60–80 high-risk fourth- through eighth-graders annually at four elementary and middle schools, using both adults and high school youth as mentors.

“Big Brothers Big Sisters has become the home for good things happening for our kids.”

—Rosario Oliveia,
Canutillo School District social worker

The partners moved into high gear in an effort to begin services quickly. The two partner representatives developed systems and procedures for recruiting and training mentors and enrolling mentees. BBBS staff made presentations at each school to inform teachers and staff and recruit them as mentors, and worked on developing corporate partners to obtain volunteers. They worked with school staff members to recruit high school youth from service clubs and ROTC as mentors. They also gave counselors referral slips for mentee enrollment, and developed bilingual fliers and announcements to inform students and parents about the program. Details such as establishing transportation and a schedule for high school youth to work with their mentees at local schools were also quickly developed.

Emerging Challenges

With district buy-in and initial support from school personnel, a solid funding base, an experienced BBBS agency as the lead, and common goals, it appeared that the partnership would succeed. But soon, a number of unanticipated challenges threatened the project and the partnership itself. Among the significant issues were:

Matches ending early or not lasting for a full year

- Mentoring relationships with high school youth dissolved at the end of the school year, or even at mid-year because of schedule changes or additional extracurricular activities.
- Most matches did not start until October and ended in May, with no summer programming available to bridge the summer gap.
- Adult mentoring relationships went through similar transitions as youth moved from one school to another.

Communication issues between agency and school personnel

- BBBS agency staff did not have experience working within the school culture, and lacked understanding of rules, procedures, expectations, and protocols.
- Teachers whose classes/students were affected by the project did not understand the goals and activities of the mentoring program and resented interruptions of class time.
- The BBBS agency relied on school personnel to carry out many tasks but did not work hard to communicate with them and show appreciation.
- Individual schools did not have a formal mechanism for providing feedback to the mentoring agency, so issues that arose were not dealt with.

Staffing issues

- The original number of staff assigned to this project was inadequate for ensuring continuity at each campus.
- Not enough representatives from schools were involved in referring and enrolling youth.
- District and BBBS agency coordinators did not have enough training and decision-making authority, resulting in delays in service provision and problem solving.

Partly because of many of the issues above, one elementary school eliminated the project after the first year. Both school and agency staff recognized that without significant action their partnership might not survive over the three-year grant period, much less into the future.

Corrective Actions: Evolution of Partnership and Structure

At the end of the first year, a comprehensive analysis and planning session was conducted by school district and BBBS personnel. Agency and district staff identified and assessed needs and challenges, listened to all involved personnel, and found ways to overcome many of the issues in the second year. Thanks to the determination of staff, and the leadership at the school district, a plan was put in place to respond to the challenges of the first year.

Match length

Though match length remains a concern, several steps were taken by each partner to extend the match relationship.

- The school district created a summer camp program to encourage summer contact between mentors and mentees and provide much-needed recreation for students in the district.
- The high school implemented a recognition ceremony for seniors who mentored all year.
- Mentees were coached more at the time of enrollment to understand that the mentor relationship might last for less than the full school year. Outcomes showed that mentees in shorter relationships still improved.

Communication issues

Both partners worked to improve communication and recognize the work of school staff and mentors.

- BBBS agency staff, the school district coordinator, and campus coordinators from each school began to meet monthly.
- The district coordinator, campus coordinators, and BBBS staff developed a formal plan to ensure better communication with teachers, front office staff, and district leaders. The plan included making presentations to district and agency board members, newsletters featuring successful matches distributed broadly, display boards created by Bigs and Littles at each campus and the district main office, and letters to stakeholders highlighting successful outcomes and the impact on youth.
- BBBS of El Paso began providing regular “goodies” to staff, students, and district personnel, such as thank-you notes, small gifts, a pizza party in the fall, and an ice cream social at each campus in the spring, using donated items and non-grant funds.
- Each school campus created a Mentor Center stocked with educational games, activities, magazines, and arts and crafts supplies.

“Although many of the challenges we faced were dealt with head-on, we found that some of the cultural and communication issues resolved themselves naturally with greater familiarity, longevity, and the success and excitement from participants. When campus coordinators started hearing from kids, ‘Miss, Miss — when am I getting my Big Sister?’ we knew we’d suddenly become a part of the District and these children’s lives.”

—Beth Senger, Executive Director,
BBBS of El Paso

Staffing issues

- To increase staff time available to the project, the district coordinator secured resources to offer supplemental pay to one teacher at each campus who acts as the coordinator of mentoring services for that school. A formal job description is provided and each teacher signs a contract outlining expectations.
- BBBS developed a day-long workshop presented in the fall to campus coordinators that covers all aspects of coordinating mentoring services.
- Performance-based expectations were put in place for district and campus coordinators; stipends, paid by the mentoring agency or the school district, are tied to performance.
- The district established office space for BBBS staff to maintain a full-time presence.
- BBBS committed their full staff support to help school and district staff at the beginning of the school year with group training and enrollment sessions for mentors and mentees.

With these and other improvements over the past five years, the partnership has successfully served more than 400 youth, and both entities have secured funds for project expansion and continuation from private and government sources. Together, the two organizations have built a rich program that is supported by everyone involved.

“The partnership at Canutillo has been a huge challenge, but it’s been so rewarding too. We got to march in their Homecoming Parade and throw candy out to the kids. Their Superintendent just joined our Board of Directors. They started the summer camp for Bigs and Littles. We have office space out there. We’re writing several grants together right now. I just think it’s a terrific partnership.”

—Annette Bauman, Vice President of Programs,
Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Replication Tips

The lessons learned by BBBS of El Paso and the Canutillo School District helped them develop new approaches that strengthened the partnership and the mentoring program as a whole. The strategies the partnership used to overcome the challenges identified reflect many of the key elements developed by the National Collaboration for Youth. The suggestions below can help other partnerships be successful from the beginning and avoid some of the pitfalls that can occur along the way.

Shared vision and decision making among all partners

- Make sure that the vision, goals, and desired outcomes of the partnership are understood by both entities and by everyone involved at each partner agency, from superintendents and directors to teachers and line staff. Check in with your partners before moving ahead with decisions about goals, policies, procedures, staffing structures, and services.

Involvement of key stakeholders in program planning from the beginning

- Set up a series of meeting dates early in the partnership to thoroughly discuss the best format and structure for that specific partnership. When new funding is obtained, convene the team to work out specifics that are approved by all partners. Include both decisionmakers and staff responsible for implementation.

Clear communication structure with regular opportunities for open discussion among partners

- Don’t assume that communication is happening; instead, build structures that encourage communication at all levels and all sites. In addition to key program staff, include mechanisms to communicate with teachers, counselors, office staff, and parents. Keep all partners updated about key aspects of program implementation.

Clear roles and responsibilities grounded in the planning process and put in writing

- Develop written agreements at the beginning of the partnership to outline roles and responsibilities of both entities. Review these regularly and make needed changes as the partnership evolves and the program is implemented. Create job descriptions for all staff, with roles clearly outlined and be sure that expectations are realistic. Consider creative ways to fund and motivate site staff, such as incentive pay based on accomplishments.

Ongoing staff development with all partners

- Provide initial and ongoing training sessions for both school and mentoring agency staff to improve service delivery and increase communication. School staff may need coaching in the basics of mentoring as well as program policies and procedures. Agency staff need training on school issues, school culture, and academic goals for the students. Training can be done informally, through regular meetings of school site staff and agency staff, or more formally, such as inviting agency staff to regular inservice training opportunities at the district.

Additional Tips for Building and Improving Partnerships

- Recognize that there will be mistakes and missteps in any new program. Be willing to work through these as they come up. Your commitment will be appreciated by other members of the partnership and will help build trust.
- All partners should be willing to use whatever support they have available to enhance the program. School districts can offer such assets as space, buses, staff time (ideally with supplemental pay), supplies, and connections to parents. Agencies can offer additional staff during busy times, marketing resources, training for school staff, coordination, and fund-raising assistance.
- Don't underestimate the amount of staff time needed to ensure success, including school staff at each site, coordination time, and district and agency leadership. Make sure that the staffing plan is realistic for the work to be done.
- Commit to seeking out long-term funding opportunities to sustain the mentoring program, and prioritize ongoing communication about how to achieve long-term stability. Partners are more likely to stay involved if they believe everyone is equally committed to the long-range future of the program.

References

- National Collaboration for Youth. (2004). National Assembly: School/Community Collaborations Matrix.
<http://www.nassembly.org/nydic/images/pdfs/CollabMatrixCBO%20.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice. (1998). *Safe and Smart: Making After-School Hours Work for Kids* [on-line].
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/SafeandSmart/ title.html>

Additional Resources

- Basca, B. *Case Study: Building Sustainable Partnerships with Schools*.
http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/partnership_study.pdf
- Community-Based Organization (CBOs) and Local Education Agency and State Education Agency (LEAs) Tool Kits* (produced by the National Youth Development Information Center)
<http://www.nydic.org/nydic/toolkits/index.htm>
- Fact Sheet 12. Preparing for Tomorrow Today: Reinventing Partnerships to Sustain Your OSD/FS Mentoring Program*.
<http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet12.pdf>
- “Forming and Maintaining Partnerships.” Module 4, National Mentoring Center JUMP training curriculum.
<http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/pdf/Mod4.PDF>
- Making the Grade: A Guide to Incorporating Academic Achievement into Mentoring Programs and Relationships*.
http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/making_the_grade.pdf

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