



Creating Partners For Success:

*MetLife
Peer Mentoring
Handbook*



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Creating Partners For Success:

MetLife Peer Mentoring Handbook

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College For Every Student

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FOREWORD

Creating Partners for Success: MetLife Peer Mentoring Handbook is the result of the partnership between College For Every Student (CFES)—formerly known as Foundation for Excellent Schools (FES)—and MetLife Foundation. Missy Wilkins, Mentoring Director for CFES, is a Ph.D. candidate whose doctoral research and dissertation investigated effective peer mentoring. Wilkins was a classroom teacher for 12 years. Katherine Quimby Johnson, M.A., is a freelance writer and editor who has been involved in education at various levels and has worked as a children’s librarian.

This work draws directly from Wilkins’ extensive involvement with peer mentoring in CFES schools. The true experts are the students, who have told us with all the directness of youth about their experience in school with and without peer mentoring.

While professional experience and student expertise are our primary sources, our findings are set against a growing body of educational research on secondary students’ school experience and ways to make it more effective. Much information on school transitions is available in two studies: *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships, 2004-2005*, available online; and Nancy B. Mizelle and Elizabeth Mullin’s *The Effect of Transitions into and out of Middle School*.

This handbook is designed for two audiences: adults who want to start or strengthen peer mentoring programs and the students who will be peer mentors and mentees. The section for adults contains background information on the effectiveness of peer mentoring, a description of the steps involved in setting up a program, and tips about working with student mentors. The sections for

mentors and mentees provide suggestions about how they can work with adults to improve and ensure the success of their program—and, using the words of peer mentors themselves, we describe the responsibilities and rewards their new role will bring. Mentees will find reassurance that peer mentoring will be right for them and a helpful, enjoyable experience.

We do not offer prepackaged solutions to the problems that can arise as groups work to fashion their own peer mentoring programs; they may in fact be similar to problems faced elsewhere, but there is no such thing as a solution right for every school and all individuals. Our goal is to provide guidance obtained from working with peer mentoring programs across the country for many years. Whether you are starting a new program or want to strengthen your existing program, this handbook will help you transform your ideas into an approach that will work in your community, for your school, and for your students.

Peer mentoring is a supportive relationship between an older student (a mentor) and a younger student (a mentee). MetLife Peer Mentoring raises aspirations, increases achievement, facilitates school transitions, and prepares students to gain access to and succeed in college.



Anastasia

“Peer mentoring reminded me about the importance of staying on point and getting to college,” says Anastasia, a senior at Paul Robeson High School (Brooklyn, NY). “It helped me as much as it did my mentees.” Anastasia achieved her goal. The first-generation college student will study computer engineering at Stony Brook University.

Anastasia’s life could have turned out differently. Her older sister dropped out of high school and had a baby at 16. That baby, now a ninth grader at Paul Robeson, is one of Anastasia’s mentees. “I knew from a young age that I wanted to be her role model,” Anastasia says. “I did well in school because I wanted her to do well, too.” Anastasia’s grades put her at the very top of her class.

Her niece, Phylcia, reports, “I look up to her. She inspires me with her good grades. I am so happy for her going to college and getting the scholarships. She makes me want to work harder. I want to be successful and go to college to be a photographer.”

Even after graduation, Anastasia knows the influence of her peer mentoring will continue. “My mentees look up to me. Every move I make is being watched. I know there is no option of dropping out. I have to start college and I have to finish it. It is hugely important.” Anastasia plans to have CFES Scholars from Paul Robeson visit Stony Brook next year for a personal tour of the campus.

Anastasia’s story is not unique. Across the country, hundreds of CFES students are discovering that peer mentoring smoothes their transitions and helps them develop leadership skills and strengthen their academic performance.

METLIFE PEER MENTORING: A PARTNERSHIP FOR SUCCESS

The Program

Anastasia is one of 1,525 students involved in MetLife Peer Mentoring, launched by College For Every Student (CFES) in September 2006. MetLife Peer Mentoring offers a simple, doable, high-impact strategy that has a profound, positive impact on the lives of both mentors and mentees. In this cutting-edge approach to mentoring, young people are their own solution. MetLife Peer Mentoring supports mentees in their transition to middle and high school, helps develop leadership and citizenship skills, and strengthens academic performance for all students.

The Partners

CFES

CFES, a nonprofit organization, is committed to raising the academic aspirations and performance of underserved youth so that they can prepare for, gain access to, and succeed in college. Since 1991, more than 140,000 underserved students have achieved measurable gains in academic performance, graduated from high school, and pursued higher education through a program that includes mentoring, student leadership, and the creation of pathways to college.

Peer mentoring has proven to be an effective strategy for achieving CFES's goal of making college accessible to underserved students. Older students (mentors) establish supportive school-based relationships with younger students (mentees). Mentors draw on their own recent experience to smooth their mentees' transition and guide them as they set and achieve goals, perform community service, practice leadership skills, and visit colleges.

MetLife Foundation

MetLife Foundation was established in 1976 by MetLife to carry on its longstanding tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. The Foundation supports programs that increase opportunities for young people to succeed, give students and teachers a voice in improving education, create connections between schools and communities and develop leadership. In response to issues raised in the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher : Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships, the Foundation partnered with CFES to develop and launch the MetLife Peer Mentoring Program. The Foundation is proud to sponsor the program, which brings the many benefits of mentoring relationships to older and younger students and builds stronger schools and healthier communities.

THE CASE FOR PEER MENTORING

Peer mentoring began as a grassroots phenomenon, rapidly caught hold, and is spreading across the country. The latest in high-impact mentoring began eight years ago when CFES schools in Vermont reported that older students working with younger students in reading resulted in a sharp increase in reading scores. The same thing happened with math. Other schools found that creating formal relationships between individual students in the upper and lower grades improved how students treated each other in the building, on the bus, and at recess. Staff at one school observed that regular contact between different grades helped teachers collaborate more and improved their morale. Student-to-student (peer) mentoring was a vital piece of the mentoring landscape in these schools.

Peer mentoring can supplement traditional mentoring. CFES schools have used peer mentoring to strengthen their existing programs. The Gentlemen's Club in Millville (NJ) began four years ago when two male teachers started a local men's group to mentor high school students, with the goal of decreasing disciplinary problems and improving school performance. Student participants learned about college and became involved in community service activities. The Club achieved its initial goal, as the mentees' grade-point average increased by 25 percent or one letter grade, and they attended an average of three more weeks of school. In fall 2006, as participants in MetLife Peer Mentoring, those same young men decided it was their turn to do for others what their adult mentors did for them. Along with their two male teacher mentors, they created a peer mentoring program, modeled after the original Gentleman's Club, in which they mentor male students at nearby Lakeside Middle School.

Supporting College Preparedness

MetLife Peer Mentoring prepares students for college by giving them academic support, teaching them how to set goals, and helping them improve their grades and test scores. Jovina, an eleventh-grade mentor in the Jefferson High/Wheat Ridge Middle School program (Edgewater, CO), talked to her eighth-grade mentees about what her high school would expect of them and what they could expect from teachers. Afterwards, she reports, "I noticed that they would work harder to get better grades." Jovina's perception is substantiated by a recent CFES survey of MetLife Peer Mentoring participants, in which 88 percent of mentees reported improved grades and 87 percent reported improved study habits.

Mentoring also helps mentors improve performance. Laura, a tenth-grade mentor at Delta High School (CO), says, "I got my best grades ever because I was involved in mentoring. When I started peer mentoring, I looked at school differently."

Peer mentoring also supports students during the college application process. The twelfth-grade peer mentors at Wadleigh Secondary School (Harlem, NY) made sure that every senior at their school applied to college. Not only did they achieve this goal, but also each student received at least one college acceptance. The twelfth graders then prepared the junior class for the same goal the following year.

Meeting Challenges

Luis

Luis, a tenth grader at Bulkeley High School (Hartford, CT), understands the difference peer mentoring can make. His own introduction to high school was rough: “I had a bumpy start in high school. I was nervous the first day of school. The building is big, and there were issues around bullying. Bullying can stop you from getting a good education. When I came to high school, I did not have a peer mentor, and it would have helped me. Now I want to be that person to others.” He asked to join the peer mentoring leadership team as soon as it formed.

According to Luis, peer mentors have a major advantage over adult mentors: “Peer mentors know what is going on in high school. They know the struggle. Adults say they do, but what adults know is not today, it’s way back when. I was where my mentees are just a year ago and know high school today.”

Over the school year, Luis watched his mentees’ progress: “My mentees like school now, and they didn’t before. They made friends with one another. They have goals. I see them as more organized. They pay more attention to everything. I help them to learn about options in high school. I am glad I mentored.”

Luis describes how the experience changed him: “I made new friends, became a student leader, and developed new strengths. Having someone look up to me forced me to listen and become patient.”

As students like Luis move up the educational ladder, they face challenges that peer mentoring addresses. In the process, peer mentoring helps students successfully prepare for college.

Transitions

Starting middle school or high school is a major challenge for students. According to *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships, 2004-2005*, a majority of students report feeling anxiety or fear about entering a school that is often larger than the one they left.

However, that same study reports that most students have no support during

this transition. One-third received no information or guidance about what classes to take when they started their new school. One-fifth were not even told the location of such essential services as the nurse's office or cafeteria. Other students, like Marcie, an eleventh-grade mentor at Wewahitchka High School (FL), could have used reassurance. "I wish I had a mentor when I was in middle school," she says, "someone who would have told me that everything was going to be fine."

The consequences of a rocky start, especially in ninth grade, are enormous for both the individual student and society as a whole. A study by the National Dropout Prevention Center concluded that students often drop out at crucial transition points. However, that same study reports that students are less likely to drop out if they participate in programs that help them make the transition.

MetLife Peer Mentoring provides students entering a new school with accessible information. MetLife peer mentors staff information booths in school lobbies, they create pamphlets with information on everything from the cost of school lunches to where to find the nurse's office, and they even hold fashion shows demonstrating school dress codes. At Colorado's Delta High School, where school spirit is a big part of life, tenth-grade mentor Laura reports, "We taught the eighth graders the high school cheer so when they get here they'll already know it."

Regular meetings between mentors and mentees provide students with the critical social connections that ease the transition to a new school. Denise, a sixth-grade mentee at Hartford Magnet Middle School (CT), says, "I talk to her, usually about girl things," and one eighth-grade mentor at that same school reports, "Now I hear other sixth graders talking in homeroom, 'I want one of those mentors.'"

Annell, a mentee at Roberto Clemente Middle School (Harlem, NY), says, "Mentoring changed me, the way I think in school. I always thought I would fail, but the mentors told me to pay attention in class and do my homework. I'm more comfortable asking a mentor about something than I am asking a teacher." Peer mentors at Roberto Clemente not only helped increase their mentees' scores on math tests and quizzes, but also teachers observed increasing confidence and self-esteem in the mentees.



Bullying and the Threat of Violence

Luis's experience with bullying is far from unique. As many as half of new students report being bullied or teased. This experience affects their emotional and social well-being and, as a result, their academic performance. Peer mentoring combats bullying by involving students in an accepting group. It discourages students from becoming bullies by nurturing their leadership abilities.

School violence was a major concern to half the students surveyed in *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives on High School Dropouts*, who felt their schools did not do enough to protect them. Peer mentoring decreases the sense of threat by addressing two known risk factors for youth violence: low commitment and lack of involvement. CFES research shows that involving students in social and service activities increases student commitment.

Boredom and Alienation

Feelings of alienation are common among students. More than one-third feel that they count for little in school, while others feel left out. Half the students who drop out of school report feeling disengaged or bored, feelings that lead to increased absenteeism before they leave school.

Recent CFES MetLife Peer Mentoring survey data show that 90 percent of mentees had improved their school attendance. Mentees look forward to and do not want to miss time with their mentors. Seventy-four percent of mentors, many of whom are already student leaders with a strong commitment to school, reported similar improvement. Once mentors see how much mentees depend on them, they are motivated to show up when they say they will.

Peer mentoring significantly diminishes student feelings of alienation. In another CFES study, 89 percent of mentors said that being involved with mentoring made them like coming to school more. Ninety-nine percent of mentors and mentees said that peer mentoring was a good experience and that they want to continue in the program.

What Does It Feel Like to Start at a New School?

MetLife peer mentors in New York City said:

- Awkward
- Different
- Exhilarating
- Fresh start
- Frustrating
- Intimidating
- Outsider
- Pressured
- Stressful

Providing Opportunities for Growth

MetLife Peer Mentoring enhances students' experience of secondary school by offering opportunities for community service and the development of lifelong leadership skills. Ninety-seven percent of mentees and mentors in the recent CFES study report that peer mentoring has helped them grow or improve. Eighty-nine percent of mentors reported their plans for the future had improved.

Luis credits his involvement with CFES for new opportunities. "I probably wouldn't have had the confidence or even thought about applying for the law/architectural firm internships. I hope, by being a peer mentor, that I can help other students to get that confidence to do things they didn't think were possible and realize all of the doors that are open to us."

Community Service

A recent study by the Corporation for National and Community Service identified the three elements a service project needs in order to be most effective: 1) students must be involved in planning the activity; 2) they must have an opportunity to write or reflect upon the experience; and 3) they must participate for at least one semester. The more elements a project includes, the more effective it is, yet only 10 percent of school service activities include all three. MetLife Peer Mentoring does.

A second study by the Corporation for National and Community Service shows that students from low-income families are less likely than their peers to participate in community service. MetLife Peer Mentoring addresses this inequity by engaging underserved students.

That same study reported that middle school students are one-third less likely to have opportunities to volunteer in school-based service activities than high school students. MetLife Peer Mentoring offers middle school students the same opportunities as students in the upper grades.

Leadership

MetLife peer mentors develop leadership skills by planning and carrying out activities. Students typically report that after becoming a mentor they grow confident and capable. Because they regard mentoring as an activity for adults or college students, mentoring



makes students feel mature. As Laurie, an eighth grader at Dolan Middle School (Stamford, CT), says, “I don’t feel like a 14-year-old teen, I feel like a responsible young adult.” The leadership opportunities offered by peer mentoring help students realize that they have something worthwhile to give back to their community; this in turn gives them a sense of self-worth and pride.

Offering Unique Strengths

Laura

A tenth grader at Delta High School, Laura went to the middle school to mentor eighth graders. “We helped them so their transition from middle school to high school would be easier,” Laura explains. “One of our goals was to break cliques so people will meet other people. We told them all about the clubs, teachers, classes, and everything. By getting involved and joining clubs and other groups, you get to know each other better.”

Mentors and mentees visited Mesa State College at Grand Junction together. “We talked to the parents about it, and they gave us their full support,” says Laura.

She reports that the mentors’ efforts have paid off: “I’ve seen an improvement in them. In the beginning they were scared and shy, and now they talk to everyone and different people, not just their cliques.”

Mentors and mentees will continue their relationship into high school. “We are going to take it to the next level,” Laura explains. “We are going to work with the same students, but we are going to coach them academically so they are doing their best academic work through their transition.” One thing Laura knows for sure: “When I was a part of mentoring, I was doing something big, something that was really going to make the high school better.”

Students Rely on Each Other

“It is the relationship with their fellow students that teens value most in their school life,” reports *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2004-2005*. Although many students feel like outsiders, most do think that other students in their new school get along well with each other and say that their



classmates are the part of school they like the most. Thus peer mentoring provides mentees with mentors from the group they already value, respect, and admire.

By avoiding adult-created or prepackaged programs and by engaging young people in planning, students have the opportunity to make decisions and generate solutions. This active participation leads to gains in student confidence and experience in leadership and community service.



Students Know Their School

Students who have recently made the transition to a new school know what information would have been useful to them and are much more aware of the issues and challenges facing incoming students. Their insider's view is unique to peer mentors.

Student Mentors Ensure Program Sustainability

Peer mentoring is less complicated to implement than mentoring by community members or college students. There is no need to recruit outside volunteers, to fingerprint or conduct background checks, or to obtain school board approval. There also is no shortage of supply; as long as there are schools, there will be students who need mentors and those who are eager to step into that role.

Gaby

Gaby, a sixth-grade mentee at Wewahitchka Middle School, knows that peer mentoring made a difference. "It was the most important part of my year. It felt so good to have someone there just for me." Her mentor, Santana, helped Gaby make her way around the new, larger building, learn what clubs to join, and ultimately helped her overcome her shyness. Gaby credits Santana's support for her better grades and attendance. "I'd like to be a mentor someday so I can do for my mentee all those things that Santana did to help me."

Peer mentoring presents the ultimate win-win situation. It benefits mentors and mentees, increasing academic performance in both groups, and it leads to an improved school climate. In the recent CFES MetLife Peer Mentoring survey, the vast majority of mentors and mentees reported overall improvement in grades, personal goals, and attitudes.

HOW TO SET UP AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM

Setting up an effective peer mentoring program is a step-by-step process. Your program will run smoothly if you follow each step—from setting the stage, through getting started and rolling out your program, to maintaining momentum.

Set the Stage

Gather Ideas

Once you've decided to start peer mentoring at your school, the next step is to explore the variety of ways peer mentoring can be implemented. Contact two or three schools directly to find out about their programs. Hearing what people are doing in other programs and visiting them will give you a sense of how you can meet your school's needs.

As you look, focus on particular aspects of a program. You may want to look at one school's method of selecting mentors to provide academic support or how another school found community organizations that needed volunteers.

Feel free to mix and match and adapt to fit your school's unique circumstances. One size does not fit all—not for people, not for schools, and not for peer mentoring programs.

Consideration #1: Your peer mentoring program must work for your school.

Form an Exploratory Discussion Group

Once you have your ideas, form an exploratory discussion group with key representatives from your school. Your CFES team may be part of the group, but your principal and students must be included. Administrative support is vital to the success of peer mentoring in any school. Student participation at this stage increases student willingness to participate overall and gives you the benefit of their perspective. After all, who knows better what it feels like to be a student at your school?

The exploratory discussion group will be your think tank. The two or three meetings this group holds are times to generate and discuss ideas, gather data, and put everything out on the table. Meetings are not a time to push your own agenda.

To help you set up your program, here's a list of things to consider and discuss with the exploratory discussion group:

- ***What is the purpose or goal of the program? What need will it fill?***

• **What assets and strengths does your school have? Some examples are:**

- common space (library, cafeteria)
- after-school bus
- nearby community outreach possibilities (nursing home, day care, homeless shelter)
- volunteers

• **Who (adult and students) will coordinate this program at your school?**

Having a team of adults and students lead the program benefits both groups. Students develop leadership skills, and the adults are relieved of certain duties.

• **What sort of peer mentoring program will it be?**

Your program's purpose affects who you choose as mentors and mentees and when they will meet. If your goal is to raise academic performance, you may be looking for different students than if your goal is to increase attendance. Your program's purpose and your school's schedule will affect whether you meet during particular classes or after school.

• **Who will mentor—which grade, population, or group?**

The ratio of mentor to mentees will depend on the purpose and goals of the program, the age and needs of the mentees, and the number of mentors available. One mentee per mentor or two or three mentees per mentor works well.



• **How can you attract mentors?**

Could mentoring count toward your school's community service requirement for graduation? Could peer mentoring be used for class credit or a class project? Is a group of students looking for a purposeful activity?

• **Who will the mentees be?**

How you identify mentees depends on your program's purpose and what will work in your school. At some schools a select group is chosen by grade or class. All new students (freshmen in high school, sixth graders in middle school) might be mentored by students a year or two further along in their education. Or students struggling with math might be tutored by those with

proficiency. Sometimes mentees are referred by teachers; sometimes students sign up to be mentees.

- ***How will you measure program and mentor/mentee success?***

Evaluation is an important component of any program. Keep it simple: Photographs and artifacts, journals, attendance records, improvement in grades, reports of changes in behavior or attitude, survey results, or similar methods are effective forms of evaluation. Whatever your method, evaluate on a regular basis.

“Hooks” for Mentoring:

- Offer it as an elective course.
- Allow it to fill a community service requirement for graduation or membership in an honors club.
- Make it a service learning project.
- Remind mentors that service is a factor in college admissions decisions, and offer to write a letter of recommendation for them.
- Hold meetings during lunch somewhere other than the cafeteria.
- Organize special field trips.
- Provide a prominently displayed recognition plaque.

Get Started

After the exploratory discussion group has decided your program’s purpose and who will be involved, you are ready to organize.

Create a Core Team

Your core team of adults and student leaders may or may not be identical to your exploratory discussion group. Make sure the adults involved are easy for students to connect with during the day. This helps with communication and lets the program work efficiently.

The students should come from different social groups within the school and should include more than the obvious leaders. Students who may appear to be discipline problems have been known to become outstanding school citizens when given the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities.

Students whose learning disabilities make academic achievement difficult may reveal previously unrecognized abilities. Luis took the initiative by walking up to Debbi Sicaras at Bulkeley High School (CT) and saying, “I want to be a leader.” Lucero, a peer mentor at Delta High School (CO), faced a different challenge. When she was a freshman at the school, she didn’t speak English. After three years of involvement with CFES, she became a peer mentor, “She’s an unstoppable powerhouse who has influenced many,” says Delaine Hudson, Delta principal and mentoring coordinator.

Often one person recognizing some sign of leadership potential is all it takes

to start that child on a path to achievement. Nancy Levey, CFES liaison at Paul Robeson High School (Brooklyn, NY), remembers when Anton was a shy mentee who barely spoke above a whisper. Now he's a confident and active peer leader who says, "I'm part of this school, and as a leader I want to show incoming ninth graders that we are all one family."

Write Your Program Description

A written program description is a useful tool. It helps you and your core team focus on your vision. Keep it simple and short so you'll have an easy answer when people ask what you are doing.

Your program description will include your end goal. Make sure that you, like your students, set realistic goals for achieving it.

Your program description also can be used to market the program to potential mentors and mentees, school staff, and parents. Use it when writing press releases to notify the community that something great—peer mentoring—is going on at your school.

Obtain Administrative and Family Approval

It's important to have full administrative support for your program. Your school principal, who needs to be involved from the beginning, can help you obtain the approval of other administrators. It's always best to do this well ahead of time.

Families can become great advocates, so be sure to inform parents and other caregivers about your program. While mentoring usually happens at school, having the support of families strengthens the program because the students will receive positive reinforcement at home as well as at school.

Set Your Peer Mentoring Calendar

Setting your calendar early in the school year is important for overall organization. Include your program's start and end dates. Allow planning time at the beginning of the year. Wrap up at least a week before the school year ends to avoid that chaotic period.

Mark the weeks when mentoring will not happen because of vacation, testing, class trips, and other pre-scheduled events. Schedule dates for training, a kick-off activity, mentor check-in meetings, group events, and special field trips. Schedule

Fun and Simple Celebrations:

- Drive-in at the gym (mentors and mentees make cars from cardboard boxes)—remember the popcorn!
- Sleepover at school
- Face painting
- Karaoke
- Fine dining by candlelight

celebrations. The pleasure of anticipation adds to the experience and boosts student (and adult) commitment to peer mentoring. Scheduling celebrations during lulls in the year spices things up. We all need it!

Make sure everyone—mentors, mentees, administrators, other teachers—has a copy of the calendar. You'll want to ensure that the entire school knows your schedule to avoid conflicts. If you do your calendar first, you'll be one step ahead of everyone else.

Design Your Mentor Application

The mentor application not only helps match mentors and mentees, but it also helps you learn about your student leaders. The answers to questions about student skills, talents, and strengths will tell you who will volunteer for various leadership tasks and who will work well together. (Mentee applications look similar but usually ask what students are looking for most from their mentor.)

Select Mentors

The process of identifying mentors varies from school to school. Schools may put up posters advertising mentoring positions or teachers may be asked to nominate students. Generally, students fill out and submit an application. Sometimes a letter of recommendation from a teacher accompanies the application. At Hartford Magnet Middle School (CT), the National Junior Honor Society students were invited to fill out an application to mentor, but the program grew to include other students in the school.

You also may want to use a group that is already involved in similar activities. The "Link Crew" at Montrose High School (CO) volunteered for new student orientation, then stayed on as peer mentors for the school year. If you already have a mentoring program in your school, you could follow the example of the Gentlemen's Club and encourage current mentees to pass on what they've gained

Information to Include/Request in the Mentor Application Process:

Basic items to request include:

- Name, grade, age, gender
- Times available or free periods
- Applicant's signature

Other requested items may include:

- List of interests and hobbies
- List of personality traits
- Brief essay on why the student would make a good mentor
- Letter of introduction
- Letter of recommendation or reference from a teacher

Items some schools also include:

- Commitment statement for mentors and mentees to sign
- Letter to family describing peer mentoring program

from their adult mentors by becoming peer mentors.

Sometimes a class becomes the mentoring group, and everyone in the class is invited to become a mentor. If mentoring is not a good fit for a student or a student is reluctant, they can be given different options to support the program. Stefani Bleier took this approach with her Advanced Placement English class when peer mentoring began at Paul Robeson. Students who were initially reluctant worked behind the scenes on the newsletter. Over time they became as involved with mentoring as the rest of the class.

If this will be your first experience with peer mentoring, don't worry. You'd be amazed at how many times the unlikeliest students become confident leaders after being chosen as mentors. As Andy, a mentor at Wadleigh Secondary School (Harlem, NY), says, "The main difference between me and the people who used to be my friends are the choices I've made." Being a mentor made it possible for Andy to see what those choices were.

Once you've selected your mentors, you may want to have a short group-induction ceremony. Asking them to sign a pledge emphasizes the importance of their new role.

Consideration #2: Make sure your program runs smoothly before you expand.

Roll Out Your Program

Train Mentors

Because the mentor-mentee relationship is the program's foundation, it is important that mentors are comfortable in their role. That's why mentor training is vital and should happen early. Mentors need to learn about the commitment they are making, their role and its importance, the stages of a mentoring relationship, and how to handle typical situations. Training materials and support services are available through CFES.

As important as it is, this basic training just scratches the surface. Training, as you'll see, should be ongoing.

Plan Activities

It is important to have well-planned activities for the first few mentoring sessions. Both mentors and mentees may be a bit nervous, and it will take a while for them to get to know each other. Activities for these sessions need more structure than those for later sessions. It is often helpful to hold these sessions in quick succession so that mentors and mentees get to know one another in a timely fashion. Even if you plan to have mentoring every other week for the rest of the year, during the first two or three weeks you may want to hold weekly

sessions. Plan for this when you set your calendar.

Include mentors in the planning. Involvement in planning gives them ownership of the peer mentoring program, and their commitment, enthusiasm, and leadership will be communicated to their mentees.

As your core team plans, make sure that whatever the activity, mentors and mentees are clear about what to do and what is expected. When mentors have information in writing, in advance, about what will happen that day, it gives them structure and support.

During these planning meetings, you, the adult, need to have a heightened awareness of the group climate and provide just the right amount of structure. As the group becomes comfortable, be ready to respond with a more relaxed structure.

Because mentoring is for everyone, you'll want to make sure the leadership group plans activities to interest a variety of students. Some thrive on active games, while others prefer to work on some sort of dramatic activity. Still others enjoy crafts or being outdoors.

Kick Off!

The kickoff marks your program's official start. Think "group activity," something that can be photographed and written up. Don't worry if you haven't matched mentors and mentees at this stage. Again, make sure mentors are involved in the planning. They'll come up with ideas that will help your program take hold.

Five Fabulous Kickoff Activities:

- Mentor-mentee pizza party with ice-breaker activities
- Mentor-mentee outing and picnic
- Induction or a mentor-mentee matching ceremony including signing an official mentor-mentee register complete with feather pen
- Mentor-mentor field day with relay races and a scavenger hunt
- Mentor-mentee picture-taking (the pictures are priceless in June)



Maintain Momentum

Mentor Check-in Meetings

Because mentoring is an ongoing relationship and mentors are still learning, it's important to have scheduled mentors-only meetings where they can discuss issues they encounter. Check-in meetings are the mentors' support group. These meetings need to be held throughout the program, but it is important to schedule them more often at the start when mentors need the most guidance. The first few meetings will need to be structured by the adult mentoring coordinator. Throughout the year, make sure these sessions stay on general issues and don't turn into gossip sessions.

Scheduling check-in meetings during a busy school week can be challenging. Simple but effective meetings take advantage of non-academic time. Hold a check-in meeting over lunch, and ask different mentors to bring dessert to make the meeting a special event. Meet mentors during their study halls, for a few minutes before school starts, or during the afternoon of an early-release day.

Check-in Meeting Topics:

- Supporting each other while mentoring
- What's working, what's not
- Planning upcoming events
- Role-playing typical mentor-mentee situations
- Open discussions

Provide Ongoing Training

In a nutshell, mentor training is when the adults mentor the peer mentors.

Mentoring is like any other skill, rarely mastered the first time. Throughout the year, mentors need additional training sessions to help keep the program running smoothly. In addition to learning what needs rethinking and adjusting, these meetings are a time to thank mentors and give them positive feedback.

While mentor training also occurs during check-in meetings, ongoing training sessions introduce new skills such as how to prepare mentees for the end of the year. These meetings also may reinforce general mentoring practices like acknowledging mentee achievements.

These meetings should be fun—food is always a plus. Mentors at Hartford Magnet Middle School look forward to an ice cream sundae party with ingredients they supply. Training may focus on acting out mentoring scenarios or planning upcoming activities, but whatever else, this is a time when adults and mentors talk about what is working and what isn't.

Mentor training sessions help your students deal with what Rob, a peer mentor at Lewis Fox Middle School (Hartford, CT), describes as the biggest challenge facing student leaders: "Getting other students to recognize their

potential as leaders.” Training sessions reinforce the peer mentors’ group identity, and especially if the events are fun and the word gets out, they help raise the social profile of peer mentoring within the school.

Spread the Good News

Don’t let the publicity stop after the kickoff. Keeping others informed about program achievements builds support for your program. Students can photograph and write, building their own skills while they bring attention to the program. They may even want to make a mini-documentary to share with the rest of the school, with parents, or with the school board.

Even something as simple as having students wear matching T-shirts on mentoring days creates visibility and makes peer mentoring enticing to other students. Gregory, a mentor at Wadleigh Secondary School, says, “I saw all the recognition my peers were getting for being in CFES, and I wanted to get that, too.”

Fine-tune Your Program

Effective programs are never truly complete. Core team members are always setting new goals and assessing progress. They contact other programs to share concerns and find new ideas. They network in their school and community.

They ask students open-ended questions that encourage active student participation—questions such as, “What do you think we could do that would make next year’s students feel welcome at our school?” They continue to improve their best practices. Effective peer mentoring programs are constantly adapting and growing to meet the needs of their students.

That’s it! Those are the basic guidelines for creating an effective peer mentoring program at your school.

Consideration #3: Start small.

But what’s even more important—start!

Ongoing Training Topics:

- Organization and time-management skills to help mentees (and mentors)
- An exploration of learning styles
- Ways to be a positive role model
- Goal setting as an effective tool
- Techniques for weaving college discussions into mentoring sessions
- Bringing closure to relationships

TIPS FOR ADULTS

Mentoring coordinators, this section is your quick guide to creating the best peer mentoring program for your school. It's divided into two parts, one on working with student mentors and the other on creating a program that will work in your school.

Student Mentors: Your Greatest Resource

As program coordinators, you are mentoring the mentors. Here's specific advice about filling that role and strengthening your school's peer mentoring program.

“Dos” and “Don’ts” for Peer Mentoring Coordinators:

Dos	Don'ts
Get started now. Make adjustments as you go.	Wait for the perfect moment to begin a program.
Set realistic, achievable program goals.	Ask more of your program and mentors than they can accomplish.
Keep it simple.	Make huge, elaborate plans that become overwhelming.
Share the experience with others.	Think you have to do it all yourself for it to be done right.
See the program as a work in progress.	Think you need to achieve perfection.
See possibilities and opportunities. Celebrate achievements!	Think negatively.
Borrow ideas from others.	Envy what others have. Your goal is a program that works for your school.

Working with Student Mentors

- **Be an Active Listener**

When you are training or meeting with student mentors, listen well and focus fully on what is being said by the mentors. This is not the time to demonstrate the ability to multitask. When you don't give student mentors your full attention, it sends the message that mentoring is not important to you and that what they say doesn't matter. (Think about how well you remember a person who set aside whatever they were doing, looked at you, and listened. Be that person for your student mentors.) Giving your student mentors your undivided attention models what they should be doing with their mentees. It not only will help them be better listeners but also will help you build a stronger program.



- **Ask Good Questions**

We've already said this once, but it's so important it's worth repeating: Asking good questions generates a variety of responses and gets students involved. "What do you wish you had known before you started school here?" Steve Marino, mentoring coordinator at Westfield South Middle School (MA), asked his mentors as part of a discussion about transitions. The list they developed inspired them to create an informational handbook, from a student's perspective, for all new students at their school.

More can be learned by asking questions that encourage mentors to think and act than by telling them what to do. By asking such questions, you model what you would like them to do with their mentees. You also learn more about them and their leadership abilities, you demonstrate the team approach, and you show them that their input is valued.

- **Share Leadership**

Student involvement in the planning process is crucial to program success. However, sharing leadership is a matter of finding the right balance. You'll want to start out very involved but ready to not do it all. Keep your radar on—as soon as you see or hear that students are ready to step up, welcome their participation and relinquish that task.

Even the most active student leadership team cannot do it all. They still really do need—and want—adult support and guidance. At the 2006 CFES National Conference, when students were discussing a student leadership event they had organized, Cardell, a mentor at Wadleigh Secondary School (Harlem, NY), described how adults coordinated the logistics of organizing buses, a task that

involved other adults who needed to hear from a recognized authority figure. Cardell's fellow organizer, Andy, described another role adults need to play: "As students, we have a lot to bring to the table, but at times we don't want to push ourselves. Adults need to push us."

- **Show Appreciation**

Make sure mentors know that the mentoring they are doing is making a difference. It matters when mentors hear from a teacher like Elaine Rodriguez, who teaches sixth-grade math at Roberto Clemente Middle School (Harlem, NY), that class participation and homework quality have improved.

- **Provide Professional Support**

As Maria Hernandez, National Junior Honor Society advisor at Hartford Magnet Middle School (CT), says, "We need to be here when mentors are not sure what to do. I had a mentor come to see me because she thought her mentee seemed unusually sad and was struggling. I spoke to the teacher who decided to call home. Upon doing so, we discovered that the student had lost an important family member. The mentor was on the front line picking up on this but was not sure where to go with it."

Peer mentoring coordinators help programs flourish when they help students stay on task and when they maintain the right balance between involvement and intervention, a balance that changes over time.

Creating Programs

Peer mentoring is not something adults can do for students. It's a process adults can make possible for students to do.

Get Started

Whatever your reason for starting a peer mentoring program, the most important thing is to start. Don't let your end goal overwhelm you. This is supposed to be fun! Figure out one activity that will be rewarding for your students and begin there.

That's what José Colon did. The school-to-career coordinator at Sport and Medical Sciences Academy (Hartford, CT) and his students planned a transition activity with Amador Mojica, principal at nearby Quirk Middle School. Doing that one activity with the middle school students was all it took. "My students got into it and caught the mentoring bug and want to go back and do more peer mentoring," Colon says. "Now that they've had a taste, they want to be involved in putting the program together."

Peer mentoring, like most of education, is a process. Start small, when it's easier to work out any kinks. Once the program is running smoothly, you can think about expanding it.

- **Recruit Team Leaders**

Your peer mentoring program's leadership team should look a lot like your school's student population in general. Remember to seek out students with potential.

It's especially important to include young men on your leadership team and to take advantage of their insights into the types of activities that male mentees might enjoy.

- **Find Activities that Matter**

The most successful peer mentoring programs are built around activities that matter. Possibilities include school transitions, pathways to college, or community service.



- **Transition Activities**

Transitions usually take a full year. If your program focuses on transitions, plan a series of activities that will help students gradually adjust to their new school. Successful transition activities are fun and social, presented from the student perspective, and include movement and activity.

Examples:

- Hold a spring dance for incoming students combined with small-group tours.
- Organize a spring school fair with booths and information about clubs, sports, etc.
- Sponsor a barbecue for incoming students held a week or two before school starts.
- Set up a fall information booth staffed by mentors.

- **Pathways to College Activities**

Preparing students to gain access to and succeed in college can be approached from several directions, including college awareness and skills development.

Examples:

College Awareness:

- Play games such as "College Jeopardy," "College Bingo," or "Who Wants to Be a College Student?"
- Transform the school into a college for a day. Designate an admissions office, a financial aid office, etc. Mentors staff the offices, while mentees serve as college tour guides.
- Stage a mock college fair using brochures from various colleges.
- Visit a college together and take pictures.

- Attend a college game, play, or other event as a group, or visit a college science lab, museum, or planetarium together.

College Skills Development:

- Practice public speaking.
 - Fill out sample college applications.
 - Write sample application essays.
 - Hold mock admissions interviews.
- **Leadership through Service Activities**
Knowing they are involved in something that benefits someone else increases student commitment to peer mentoring.

Examples:

- Set up or work on a school-wide recycling project.
- Participate in a community-wide cleanup or school beautification project.
- Take a celebration to a senior center.
- Help at a soup kitchen or food bank.
- Collect clothing for a homeless shelter.

- **Network**

A peer mentoring program, like mentoring itself, is not a solitary activity. Even if you are the only mentoring coordinator at your school, seek out your natural allies in the school or community. The physical education teacher or the art teacher may have a useful idea for an ice-breaking activity or project. A nearby senior citizen center may be looking for contact with young people. When we collectively put different ideas together, we come up with something better, stronger, and more creative than when we work alone.

Network with other peer mentoring coordinators. Contacting other schools with mentoring programs is helpful, even if their schools aren't just like yours. You may find that they have discovered a way to deal with the same challenges you've encountered. It's fine if the school contact isn't someone you know well; people love to share success stories and brainstorm challenges. Stay connected—it's always useful to have a sounding board for new ideas. Next thing you know, you've got your own peer mentor.

Because of her interest in a mentoring program for boys, Haidee Smilowitz, a teacher at Thomas C. Giordano Middle School (Bronx, NY), made a connection with Scot Hoover and Brian Sloan from Millville High School (NJ). As a result, Smilowitz created her own program modeled on Millville's, where students learn etiquette, set achievement goals, explore colleges, and develop ways to help others.

Several peer mentors from Paul Robeson High School (Brooklyn, NY), along

with their teacher, Stefani Bleier, helped train mentors from nearby Beginning with Children Charter School. These adults and students reunited in the spring at the MetLife Peer Mentoring Best Practices Workshop held in New York City.

CFES offers networking opportunities, from peer mentoring workshops to the National Conference, where you can share and find ideas. And don't forget to check out the CFES website at www.collegefes.org.

- **Share Information**

Keeping everyone in the loop is vital to program success. Given students' busy lives and their developing organizational skills, they need plenty of advance notice about an event or deadline. Be sure to remind them more than once.

When a mentoring program fails to thrive, poor communication is often the root of the problem. As the mentoring coordinator, you help keep communication flowing by passing on:

- reminders about going to mentor meetings and other activities;
- any notes from mentors to mentees about having to miss a mentoring session;
- thank-you notes from community organizations.

- **Be Flexible**

Mentoring programs are works in progress, just like the students they serve. Don't hesitate to make adjustments as you go. What's most important is that your program works in your school.

What happened at Paul Robeson High School illustrates the significant impact of a slight adjustment. Mentors asked teacher Stefani Bleier if they could meet with their mentees during study hall because it gave them more time together than when they met during their Advanced Placement English class. Although it wasn't what she had planned, Bleier says, "It worked out much better this way. The adjustment made a huge difference, and it happened because the students asked for it."

Include the naysayers in your flexibility plan. Every institution has at least one person who resists change. However, teachers have observed that when the naysayer is included as part of the team, the pessimist turns into peer mentoring's biggest advocate. When that happens, you'll know your program is a success.

- **Provide Continuity through Transitions**

Students will come and go. Some will enter as shy, uncertain mentees and become confident, self-assured mentors before they move on to high school or college. While the students on your program's leadership team will be involved in planning the program for the following year, you will be the one who provides continuity. You'll be the one who sets next year's calendar at the end of this year to get a jump on things. You'll know where the mentoring program group journal is kept, and you'll be the one to send out the first reminder in the fall. You'll also be

the one to tell new administrators and teachers about your program.

The longer you work with any program, the easier (and the better) it gets. Peer mentoring is the same. So keep at it. Remember, you're not in this alone. Any time you need advice or encouragement—or any time you'd like to share your program's latest achievement—reach out. Your fellow mentoring coordinators will be happy to share or support. Most of all, reach out to your peer mentors; they'll respond enthusiastically, and their response will energize you. Peer mentoring reminds us why we went into education in the first place—to make a difference in the life of a child.

TIPS FOR MENTORS

Mentors, here's where you find out how to make your peer mentoring program the best it can be. Our tips are divided into two sections: one on creating programs and one on mentoring.

Developing Your Program

You Are the Key

Luis, a mentor at Bulkeley High School (Hartford, CT), has it right: “Peer mentors know what is going on in high school. They know the struggle. I was where my mentees are just a year ago and know high school today.” No one knows better than you what it's like to be a student in your school right now. You remember, like Marcie, an eleventh-grade mentor at Wewahitchka High School (FL), how nice it would have been to have “someone who would have told me that everything was going to be fine.”

Your peer mentoring program needs your knowledge and your point of view. When MetLife peer mentors were discussing transition activities, Sam, a mentor at Hartford Magnet Middle School (CT), said that “visiting the school once in the spring is not enough. You can't remember everything.” His insight helped his school develop a series of smaller events to ease new students' transition.

As part of the student leadership team, you will work with adults who may need your help to find their place in your peer mentoring program. You also will work with a diverse group of students, planning activities and preparing to pass the torch to next year's leaders.

Working with Adults

- ***Help Us Learn to Share Control***

This can be tricky. You may have noticed that adults are used to being in control and tend to think that if something is to be done right, we have to do it

ourselves. You need to be patient and persistent in showing us that you can take responsibility. Remind us that if we want you to become leaders, we need to let you practice leadership. Eventually, we'll catch on.

When the adults in your group start talking about what needs to be done, volunteer! That's what Carlos did. He and the rest of the Westfield South Middle School (MA) peer mentoring leadership team met a week ahead to plan a peer mentoring goal-setting activity. They met again the next day to make posters and signs.

Of course, the risk you take in proving your abilities to adults is that we might decide to step back and let you completely take over the program. (Remember, adults tend to be busy people.) So you may have to be direct about what you need from us. Andy, a mentor at Wadleigh Secondary School (Harlem, NY), speaks for his generation when he says, "As students, we do have a lot to bring to the table, but at times we don't want to push ourselves. You adults need to push us."

- ***Tug on Our Heartstrings***

When adults get busy, mentoring hopes and dreams may get lost. Your youthful enthusiasm as you ask us about the next meeting, or tell us that you can't wait for it, motivates us like nothing else.

Debbi Sicaras, teacher and mentoring coordinator at Bulkeley High School, remembers a day the school schedule changed, canceling mentoring. Kids came up to her in the halls asking when they would make it up. "Take mentoring away and you're messing with an untouchable," Sicaras says. "It made me realize just how important this is to them."

Mentoring programs have actually taken off this way. After students at Westfield North Middle School (MA) attended a CFES Best Practices Workshop, Debbie Wood, the mentoring coordinator, reported that the school expanded its mentoring program. "We've been taking them to the elementary buildings, and they act like they've been to Disneyland! The teachers and principals of the buildings they've visited have been very complimentary."

- ***Show Appreciation***

Everybody likes to be thanked. That includes adults. Let us know you're glad we started a peer mentoring program. Thank us for letting you take charge once you've shown us how interested and capable you are (especially since, as you know, it's hard for us to give up control). That motivates us to do even more.

You'll be able to tell when you've struck all the right chords. You'll see our faces light up and our eyes soften—and the reason is that you have just reminded us why we went into education in the first place: to help kids become happy and confident and realize their dreams. When you see this, pat yourself on the back. You were a big part of the reason we rediscovered our dreams.

"It's fabulous that we have leaders like these students," says Amy Casparino,

a proud teacher and the mentoring coordinator at Hartford Magnet Middle School. “They get things done.” Casparino was talking about Wesley, his mentor Kyle, and several other peer mentors at Magnet Middle, all of whom managed registration for the Hartford MetLife Peer Mentoring Best Practices Workshop.

Create the Program that Works for Your School

Identify the school resources you could use for your peer mentoring program. If community service is a graduation requirement, make that the focus of your peer mentoring activities and fill the requirement together. If your school has a late bus, that means you can hold weekly meetings after school.

The mentors at Paul Robeson High School (Brooklyn, NY) all took Stefani Bleier’s Advanced Placement English class, so it was natural for them to practice their writing skills by creating an informative newsletter for the school’s ninth graders. At Port St. Joe Middle and High School (FL), shared common spaces—the cafeteria and library—make the perfect spots for high school mentors to meet their middle school mentees during lunch or study hall. Two different schools, two different peer mentoring programs, but each works.

Feel free to borrow ideas from other programs and adapt them. Your program will work best if it is custom-fitted to your school.

Underneath the custom fit, successful peer mentoring programs share certain characteristics:

- ***An Unlikely Leadership Combo***

Diversity is the key to a successful peer mentoring leadership team. From jocks, geeks, artists, and students with learning differences to drama queens, preps, band nerds, and cheerleaders, the greater the variety of people your leadership team includes, the more people you will reach. Bulkeley High School’s four peer leaders include two girls, two boys; three Hispanics and an African American; an athlete, an academic, a cheerleader, and a student with a learning disability. Peer mentoring isn’t about hanging out with your best buds; it’s about making new buds while you create a mentoring program for others.

- ***Activities for All***

Peer mentoring is for everyone, but not everyone likes the same things. So vary the group activities you plan, and have a variety of people involved in the planning. That means both boys and girls! Some groups do individual projects most weeks and whole-group activities once in a while.

- ***Plan to Pass the Torch***

You’ll know that you’ve got the program that works for your school when it continues after you have moved on. “Peer mentoring starts a chain reaction,” says Shelby, a mentor at Delta High School (CO). “We get into it and it is passed

Fun-for-All Group Activities:

- Create a school-wide scavenger hunt for new students to learn about the school.
- Plan an event/celebration for the school or class:
 - Drive-in movie night (make cars out of cardboard boxes—and remember the popcorn!)
 - Ice cream social
 - Dance
 - An evening of improv
 - Poetry slam
 - Talent show
- Draw a floor map of your school for visitors.
- Get involved in a community service project.
- Visit a college campus.
- Create “welcome to our school” folders for school visitors or new students.
- Design special name tags for college and adult mentors.
- Start a school-wide recycling program.
- Encourage random acts of kindness.
- Organize an extracurricular activity fair.
- Brainstorm a list of activities to keep on hand.
- Organize school-wide pathways to college activities.

down to others and continues on that way. We are starting a cycle that will continue long past our time in high school.”

You can do several things to make sure your program keeps going strong:

- **Keep a group journal throughout the year.** Include what worked well and what didn't. Pass it on to the next group of mentors. Not only will your writing remain after you are gone, but also next year's group will be able to add to it.
- **Be involved in planning next year's program.** Ask adults to fill in where you want or need them.
- **Help recruit new mentors.** Invite them to a fun event in the spring to get them psyched to start the program in the fall.



- **Help train new mentors.** As an experienced mentor, you are the best trainer. Inviting new mentors to spend a few weeks observing you in action is a good way to train them.

Getting into Mentoring

“Everyone needs a mentor, and everyone can be a mentor.”

—Doris Arrington, Dean of Student Services,
Capital Community College (Hartford, CT)

“When I first came to high school, I was really scared about the whole thing. I was not sure what to expect. I didn’t know where I was going,” explains Anton, a tenth grader at Paul Robeson High School. Now Anton is a peer mentor himself. “I’m part of this school, and as a leader, I want to show incoming ninth graders that we are all one,” Anton says.

A skilled mentor is someone you become, not someone you need to be instantly. Relax and read on for the inside scoop on becoming a mentor.

Expect Butterflies

Most new mentors may never admit it, but at first they were nervous about mentoring. Phyllis Jones, the mentoring coordinator at Olathe Middle/High School (CO), says this about butterflies: “It is perfectly normal to feel this way. It means that the mentoring is something very important to you, and you want to do a good job as a mentor. The feeling won’t last long.”

The day before their training, Sam, Sean, and Catalina, three of the Olathe mentors, said, “We feel like we’re frauds.” But in no time they were pros. Jones reports, “We were on our way to a college, and they were in the front of the bus talking to the mentees about the visit. They said everything I would have, but they did it better than I could myself. The incredible part was they did this all on their own.”

The most important thing you bring to mentoring: you! Be yourself and have fun. Guillermo, an Olathe mentor, told us something we hear from many of you time and time again: “It is important for mentors to be themselves.”

Give It Time

Were you and your best friend instant bffs? No. Relationships take time. Your relationship with your mentee is no different. Give it a chance.

Joseph, a mentor at Pelham Preparatory Academy (Bronx, NY), says, “I decided to build my mentee’s trust. If I trusted him, maybe he’d trust me. It worked. It didn’t happen overnight. You have to be active and involved and show them you are there to support them. Now we talk just about every day, and he comes to see me whenever he needs me. Today he found me to show

me a play he wrote for English class. He was one of a few people to follow the teacher's directions correctly, and it was in his worst subject! Our relationship has grown immensely. We started out as mentor and mentee, but now we are friends."

Having a hands-on activity often makes it easier to talk and get acquainted. At Dolan Middle School (Stamford, CT), mentors and mentees work on service projects such as holiday baskets during their meetings.

Sarah, a mentor at Hartford Magnet Middle School, says, "I felt awkward at first, I wasn't sure what to say. I realized that as the mentor, I needed to lead the conversation. Once you know your common interests, things just take off from there."

Develop Mentoring Skills

Regular meetings with fellow peer mentors help you acquire skills. This is another place to figure out what works best for your program. In the beginning, you'll want to meet more often, but as mentoring gets rolling, you can have mentor-only meetings less frequently. As your skills develop, you need less support. Hartford Magnet Middle School started off the school year with mentor meetings every two weeks; before long they were able to relax that schedule and hold their mentor meetings once a month.

Most programs have regular check-in sessions set aside for mentors to share and discuss their experiences. We hear from you that the biggest draw to these meetings is food. A "make your own sundaes" party with ice cream and toppings you supply is a favorite. Homemade cookies brought in by different people, root beer floats, or takeout pizza are also popular.

During mentor meetings, make sure you focus on situations and possible responses. This is no time to name names or be gossipy. Have an adult present during mentoring meetings for support and feedback. Adults have a different perspective that can be helpful.

Watching teachers is another good way to gain mentoring skills. See if you can figure out how a really good teacher gets students to do something without having to ask.

What Mentors Do

A peer mentoring program is not about the mentors and their lives; it's about the mentees and the transition they are making. That means thinking creatively. Joseph, a mentor at Pelham Preparatory Academy, needed to go beyond a one-to-one relationship to help his mentee feel comfortable in school: "I had a mentee who was really quiet and withdrawn, so I adopted a girl mentee to join our group. Now I see them hanging out together, and he is coming out of his shell."

Most of all, being a mentor is about building a relationship that works for you and your mentee. When you're talking about goal setting, it doesn't matter

if you and your mentee are sitting at a table in the library or shooting hoops or emptying recycling bins.

Key Mentoring Skills

Mentors Have Radar

Keep it casual as you establish your relationship. Mentoring isn't some tell-all talk show. If your mentee isn't big on talking about feelings, respect their individuality and don't dig.

As a mentor, you want to spend more time listening than talking. The general rule is one-third talking and two-thirds listening. If you find yourself slipping, remind yourself who peer mentoring is all about.

Mentors Ask Questions

Asking open-ended questions is a good way to get your mentee to talk more. Questions that begin with "why" or "how" usually result in longer answers. If you ask about their favorite kind of music, follow up with a question about what they like about it.

It's better to ask questions that help mentees come up with their own solutions. If you tell them what to do, you're taking control. But if you ask questions, you'll help them figure out what works for them.

Mentors aren't supposed to have all the answers; they're supposed to show mentees how to find out answers. If your mentee asks for help with homework and you don't recognize the topic, it's fine to say, "I don't remember how to do this. Who would be a good person to ask?"

Mentors Show Up

As a mentor, you become one of the most important people in your mentee's life. If you are going to be out of school on a mentoring day, make sure word reaches your mentee. Let the mentee's teacher and the adult in charge of the mentoring program know you'll be out. When you can, write a card or leave a note to let your mentee know you are thinking about them.

Brianna, a mentor at Pelham Preparatory Academy, speaks from experience when she says, "I've learned how disappointed my mentees are when I tell them I'll do something and I fail to do it. Now when I make a promise, I deliver."

Who Mentors Are

Role Models

Your mentee wants to be like you, so be a good role model. Be responsible and respectful. Be prompt. Keep your promises. Respect classroom rules even if it is not your classroom. This shows that you know how to behave in different

situations.

Tiffany, a mentor at Wadleigh Secondary School, says, “Mentors must keep composure at all times because they [mentees] are always watching. They want to find out if you are real or fake. You have to be real and sincere. My mentee says, ‘I want to be just like you, I want to go to college,’ and I inspire her to apply to many colleges. She looks up to me in school, and I make sure I do things well to keep her positive.”

Heroes

Your mentees look up to you. Use the power that comes from that admiration wisely. Skip the put-downs and sarcasm. Encourage your mentees to set and achieve goals such as meeting new people or trying out for a team. Remind your mentees that doing well in school and participating in extracurricular activities will help them prepare for college.

Praise them when they meet their goals or have an accomplishment. Praise works best when it’s specific. “Way to go with that 82 on the spelling test. That’s a big improvement!” is more rewarding than “You go, girl!” or “Nice going, dude!”

Watch your mentee as the weeks pass. Some mentees pick up their mentor’s habits; some start to dress like their mentor. If this happens, it’s one sign that you’re their hero. And if they decide to become mentors because of the one they had, give yourself another pat on the back.

Guides

Mentors are there to guide, befriend, and support. Mentors help mentees understand a new school, set goals, meet new people, and learn how to study.

Being a guide also means being cautious about telling a mentee exactly how to handle a situation. Besides, how would you feel if the mentee followed your

“Nothings” to Do Together:

“What did you do today?” Your usual answer to that familiar question is, “Nothing”—even when you know you were up to some cool stuff. Here’s a list of “nothings” you and your mentee can do together.

- Paint a mural.
- Write articles for the school newspaper.
- Build models.
- Make cards for shut-in senior citizens.
- Research colleges online.
- Write a play.
- Play basketball.
- Start a school recycling program.
- Set goals.
- Make posters for a mentoring event.
- Do improv.
- Write and illustrate a picture book.
- Make a craft project.
- Volunteer together around the school.
- Build a science fair project.

advice and the plan backfired?

Take a tip from Maoly. Her mentee at Roberto Clemente Middle School (Harlem, NY) asked about joining an after-school activity. “I didn’t give her an answer,” Maoly reports. “I told her it was her choice and that she should think about whether it would get in the way of her school work. And I told her she should ask her parents what they thought.”

Mentees want and need to learn to do things on their own. The trick is to listen and ask questions that will let them make their own way. When you listen and guide, you help your mentees build independence and self-reliance, two important, lifelong skills.

Mentors are many important things, but mentors are not guidance counselors. If your mentee talks about self-hurting or hurting others, or about being harmed or hurt by someone else, let the adult in charge of your program know right away. You may offer to go with your mentee to see the adult, but the adult must know. This type of situation has to be handled by trained adults. Your role as mentor is important, and that’s what you need to focus on. It’s the role your mentee needs you to focus on as well.

That’s it. Now you and your fellow peer mentors have what you need to make your program its best. You know how to be the mentor your mentee wants and needs. Now it’s time to go out there and show what you can do.

TIPS FOR MENTEES

Take a Deep Breath

Feeling a little nervous about meeting your mentor is perfectly normal, especially because you’re expecting your mentor to become an important person in your life. Relax (take some deep breaths if you have to, practice smiling if you like) and remember—your mentor has been matched with you because someone thought you’d make good partners.

Be Patient

Were you and your best friend instant bffs? No. Relationships take time. Your relationship with your mentor will, too. Give it a chance. Take it from Sean, a sixth-grade mentee at Wewahitchka Middle School (FL): “Having an older friend was kind of weird at first, but I’m learning a lot from him.”

Be Up Front

Your mentor is there for you, so there’s no point in faking anything. If you don’t know something and you don’t want to ask a teacher, ask your mentor. Mentors may not have all the answers, but they know who to ask, and mentors

don't judge, they support.

However, support doesn't mean your mentor is going to hand over all the answers. Listen to Shirley, a mentee at Roberto Clemente Middle School (Harlem, NY): "When I don't get something, I go to Li for help. When I couldn't think of a topic to write on for my English Language Arts class, he told me to think about things that I know something about. He didn't tell me what to write about, but he got me started and helped me outline my essay."

For most mentors and mentees, their relationship is a mix of school and life, like it is for Nicole and Madison from Wewahitchka. Once a month they have lunch at Madison's elementary school, but they see each other much more often—on Thursdays when they take different classes at the same dance studio and almost every day when Nicole, who drives to school, tries to see Madison at the bus stop. "She's one of my really good friends, and I can go to her and talk to her," says Madison.

Be Yourself

Feeling shy? You would not believe how many mentors have said, "I used to be shy, but now that I'm involved in mentoring, I'm not anymore." It takes time (there it is again), but being part of a mentoring relationship does make people more confident.

Maybe you're the opposite of shy. Be your best self. You were chosen to be a mentee because someone saw something in you, and they matched you with your mentor because the two of you have something in common. Keep an eye on your mentor, watch how they conduct themselves, listen to how they talk. That's a great way to see what you can be.

Most Of All, Have Fun!

What One Mentee Says About Mentoring:

Gaby, a sixth-grade mentee at Wewahitchka Middle School, says, "Peer mentoring was the most important part of my year. It felt so good to have someone there just for me." Gaby's mentor, Santana, helped Gaby make her way around the new, larger building, learn what clubs to join, and ultimately helped her overcome her shyness. Gaby says that her grades got better and she missed school less because of Santana. "I'd like to be a mentor someday so I can do for my mentee all those things that Santana did to help me."



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