Best Friends Mentoring Program

20TH ANNIVERSARY

BESTFRIENDS
MENTORING PROGRAM

SINCE 1995

Merriam-Webster defines a mentor as "a trusted counselor or guide" (2009). Mentoring programs throughout the country are in the limelight as a proven practice to "change youth's life trajectories, reduce alcohol use, and improve academic behaviors" (Grossman, 2000). Mentoring is not a new concept, however. The definition has its roots in ancient Greece. The "term" mentoring actually comes from the Greek word that means "enduring" (Learnings from Mentoring Quotes, 2008). Odysseus, who was one of the most prominent Greek leaders in the Trojan War and hero of Homer's *The Odyssey,* entrusted a good friend with the education and care of his son. This trusted counselor and guide's name was Mentor. And hence, mentoring programs were begun.

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INTRODUCTION

The Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP) formed twenty years ago in 1995 and was modeled after the nationally recognized Big Brother Big Sister program. Youth aged six to sixteen who could potentially benefit from the friendship and positive guidance of a mentor are referred by parents or school personnel, and are matched with a mentor, also known as a Senior Friend, and placed into either the Community-Based Mentoring Program or the School-Based Mentoring Program. In the former, the youth, also known as a Junior Friends, and their mentors meet in the community; in the latter they meet at school. The majority of young people served by the program are in grades four and five, but all youth aged 6-16 may be referred.

Senior Friends must participate in a minimum of two and a half hours of pre-match training. This includes an orientation session that lasts approximately two hours, a brief one-on-one interview, and individual training for approximately twenty minutes. Additional training is offered to the mentors throughout the year and includes topics such as: *how to build trust and communication, valuing differences, time management*, and *stress management*. Due to limited staff and training time, all training sessions are not offered on a regular basis, nor are they all offered every year. Mentors are contacted two weeks after the match to see how things are going, and also receive monthly follow-up phone calls from BFMP staff. Mentors are encouraged to call or stop into the BFMP office anytime they have questions or concerns.

In addition to the Community-Based and School-Based Mentoring programs, the BFMP operated a Literacy Mentoring Program from the fall of 2009 to the spring of 2012. The Literacy Mentoring Program was a tutoring program for youth ages 6 to 16, and the assigned mentors were Dickinson State University (DSU) students majoring in education. College students were required to participate in the Literacy Mentoring Program to receive credit for the course. BFMP

also hosted an Outreach Mentoring Program, from the fall of 2011 to the spring of 2012 where they matched mentors with mentees in a school-based setting in the surrounding area of the South Heart, ND school district.

The purpose of this report is to identify the BFMP's successes and review the program's challenges that occurred during the 2011-2015 school years. This report will also make comparative examinations of the years evaluated. The findings identified in the report will provide guidance for the BFMP to improve its programs in the future. The report includes findings from evaluation tools administered with educators, parents, and mentors that were designed specifically to measure satisfaction in the program and improvements in mentees' academics, social skills, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of the mentoring program.

RESEARCH METHODS

OVERVIEW

The evaluation design employed for this report began in 2011, and involved literature reviews, survey tools, and data collection from schools, teachers, parents, and mentors. This 2011-2015 report continues the survey methods employed with teachers, parents, and mentors in the previous 2010-2011 school year. Wherever possible, data is compared from one year to the next to identify potential trends. With this information, the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP) may be able to identify the strengths that contribute to positive trends, and review any reasons for unfavorable trends. Based on the results, BFMP can make any adjustments that might improve the program.

Two major changes that occurred during the evaluation period (2011-2015) were the ending of the Literacy Mentoring Program and Outreach Mentoring Program in the spring of 2012. Both of these programs were discontinued due to a loss of funding and workforce changes that occurred as a result of western North Dakota's oil boom. The mentors and mentees who participated in these two programs were included in the data for the 2011-2012 school year.

The key questions this report attempts to answer are:

- Demographically, how did youth enrolled in BFMP from 2011-2015 compare to youth overall in Stark County?

- Did youth enrolled in the BFMP demonstrate improvement in their academic performance, social skills, behaviors and attitudes over the course of the school year, and overall for the four years evaluated? Are there significant differences from year to year?

- How do teacher, parent and mentor perspectives regarding youth improvement compare with each other?

- Does the type of program or length of match have any impact on the academic progress of the mentee?

- Are there differences in the level of improvement between male and female youth in BFMP?

- What were the mentors', parents', and teachers' levels of satisfaction with the support they received from the BFMP? Are there significant differences from year to year?

- Were mentors willing to continue their involvement in the BFMP when their commitment time was over, and if not, what were their reasons for leaving the program?

- What effects did youth's participation in BFMP have on stress and conflict levels in the youth's home?

This report is limited to the sample of students enrolled in the BFMP and, therefore, the study is not designed to provide any generalizations or conclusions about other mentoring programs.

Data was collected during the school years from May 2011 to May 2015 for youth enrolled in the BFMP.   Matched student numbers were entered into a *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheet and assigned an identifier (unique number) to ensure confidentiality. To determine length of match, calculations were made to determine the number of students with a sustained match for various ranges of time.

To determine improvements in academic performance, baseline data for students participating in the program were recorded in the school offices as of May 30th of each year evaluated (2011-2015). Students' grades in mathematics and English were converted to a number and placed on a spreadsheet next to each student's identifier. The numbers were entered into the spreadsheet program for comparative analysis that produced the percent of mentored students who improved their GPAs in the core subjects of math and English.

Educators were given a progress report form to record student progress in the risk areas of academic performance, social skills, attitudes, and behaviors over the course of the school year. The teachers rated each of these areas in May 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. These numbers were comparatively analyzed to determine progress over a 12-month period. For 2011-13, parents were also given a progress report form to record student progress in the four risk areas over the school year, and these were comparatively analyzed to determine progress. In 2013-15 parents filled out a parent/guardian survey that included an evaluation of youth improvement in the four risk areas. Mentors were asked to complete a survey to rate their mentees in the same four areas as the teachers and parents.

Most of the demographic data for the mentored youth were taken from the intake forms filled out at the time youth were referred to the program. These data included age, grade, gender,

and family status. To determine the numbers of mentored youth who living in poverty, school

offices were asked to identify youth who received free or reduced school lunches. These data

were added to the information corresponding to the students' code numbers on the data

spreadsheets. The *2013 North Dakota Kids Count* was reviewed to compare poverty levels and

family status for the general population of Stark County and North Dakota as a whole for

comparison purposes.

To determine satisfaction levels, teacher, parents and mentors were asked to record their

levels of satisfaction with BFMP on the surveys and progress reports handed out over the four

years. In the 2011-2013 years, parents were also asked about changes in conflict and stress

levels since their child had entered the program.

Mentors were also asked to identify the primary types of activities they conducted with

their mentees. Data supplied by BFMP provided information regarding whether mentors were in

high school, college, or were adults not currently in school. BFMP data also provided

information on the number of mentors who were willing to continue with the program, and the

reasons given by those who were leaving the program. Surveys were sent to mentors by the

BFMP staff and returned to the BFMP office.

Finally, a literature search was conducted to gather information and data from a number

of national studies and reports on mentoring programs. These data were used to compare

findings from the BFMP report to comparable findings on the national level.

DATA ANALYSIS

The BFMP staff entered all data that could be traced to specific youth onto *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheets. Information for each youth was entered onto one line under various headings, and then each youth was assigned an indicator number to ensure confidentiality. All data that could be tracked to individual youth were handled in this fashion.

The completed mentor, educator, and parent surveys were delivered to DLN Consulting, Inc. (DLN). Prior to arriving at DLN, surveys were assigned the indicator number of the youth associated with the survey. DLN staff completed the data entry for these surveys. Data was then entered into the *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheets that corresponded to the appropriate indicator numbers on the spreadsheets provided by BFMP. From the *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheets, data could be analyzed and calculated. The data analysis is the basis for the findings associated with each of the questions addressed in this report.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis of the data received from the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP) for the four school years beginning 2011-2012 demonstrated many improvements for the youth who were registered as Junior Friends. Findings do show more improvement in certain areas than in others, however. For instance, there were improvements for youth in all areas of risk. About one-third of all teachers reported improvements for social skills, attitude, and academic competency. When behavior was analyzed, four of ten indicated improvements for the BFMP youth. Girls and boys demonstrated relatively equal results in social skills and behavior. That equal rating changed for attitude and academic competency, both areas where girls demonstrated greater improvements than did boys.

Parents saw greater improvements in their children for the four risk areas than did the youths' teachers. Senior friends, or mentors, had similar responses as parents over the four years that were studied.

Overall, about one of every four Junior Friends demonstrated an improvement in their English and/or math grades by the end of the school years, but when compared with proficiency levels, over half of the youth demonstrated they were above proficiency in both academic areas by the end of each of the school years. This finding may be the most important when studying the impact of mentorship upon the Junior Friends. The greatest improvement in math occurred for youth in the school-based program, but youth in the Literacy program had the greatest improvement in English.

While over the years the progress in grades was not as significant as in earlier years of study, there was, nevertheless, improvement. The lower progress in GPA scores may be for one of two reasons:

1. There were not enough students identified as school-based mentees to determine if school-based mentoring made a greater difference than community-based mentoring.

2. A change in the grading system in the Dickinson Public Schools significantly affected the trend analysis. Methods and timing for collecting and analyzing grades will be studied by BFMP, in consultation with DLN Consulting.

Some may be concerned with the length of time it took before a referred youth was matched with a Senior Friend. Though more than five months may seem to be a long time, it consistent when compared with mentoring programs in other parts of the nation. One teacher noted that it takes parents a long time to get their paperwork completed for referred youth and, if this is consistent among parents, it might point to a longer wait period. It is important to note, however, that the analysis of the last school year, indicated a reduction in the wait time by a full month. Evaluators and BFMP should keep a pulse on this to determine if the reduction in wait time becomes a trend.

It is interesting to note that the data indicates the longer a youth was matched, the lower the improvement in academics. Possible reasons for this phenomenon were discussed earlier in the "Overview of Findings" area of this report. At this time, we can only make assumptions as to why this might have occurred as there is no data to support any possible reasons.

As in previous years, more youth enrolled in the BFMP live in poverty than other youth in Stark County and in North Dakota. Similarly, more youth enrolled in the BFMP are of a minority race more than are the overall youth population in Stark County and North Dakota. Unlike previous years of study where more BFMP youth lived in single parent homes than those in the county or state, the majority of youth over the 2011-2015 years were from two-parent households. Still, youth served by BFMP are associated with higher risk categories than the average Stark County or North Dakota youth.

What we cannot assess is the number of youth who may have moved to this area from other states where academics may not be as highly regarded as in North Dakota. We also cannot assess the number of youth who may live in temporary housing, such as RVs, campers, or hotels, which might have an influence on risk factors and academics. These are areas that we might consider adding to future studies.

Satisfaction with the BFMP was extremely high among teachers, parents and mentors. Only two respondents from all three groups over the four evaluated years indicated that their experience was anything less than satisfactory. The majority of mentors described their experience as rewarding, and many teachers and parents expressed that they were more than satisfied with BFMP as a whole. This speaks to BFMP's level of commitment to all people impacted by their program, not just youth.

Some suggestions that arose from mentor comments are additional training for Senior Friends, such as how to better support their Junior Friends in dealing with specific issues and problem-situations; and providing support groups or activities for people who volunteer as Senior Friends to connect with each other. BFMP provides adequate training for its mentors

when compared to the national recommendations. However, based on the mentors' comments, it could be beneficial to the program to provide additional training and activities.

At more than forty percent, the turn-over rate for Senior Friends was high for the four evaluated school years. One reason for this could be the Literacy Program, which ended in 2011-12, where the mentors only had a commitment expectation of one school year. Another reason could be that the majority of Senior Friends were in high school and college, which are typically transitional life stages. A recommendation is made for BFMP to work on recruiting more adult mentors who have plans to stay in the community on a longer-term basis.

The major concern of the evaluators, for the consistency of the trend data, is the large numbers of deviations in data collection and data reporting when collected over multiple years. When data is not calculated for a number of years, it becomes difficult to keep a pulse on the reporting mechanisms and data collection methods. Sometimes even a change in the staff that collects the data could have an impact on the results. Knowing that funding for the mentoring program is a concern, we still recommend program evaluation on an annual basis, if at all possible. A long term evaluation, such as this 2011-2015 study, makes comparison of data extremely difficult from year to year, especially when changes are made in grading systems, curriculum, staff changes, etc. Reviewing the progress of the program on an annual basis would allow for more consistent tracking and trends and would make it easier to identify anomalies in the findings. Finally, an annual evaluation would be far less costly in any given year than one that requires studying large volumes of data over four or five years.