

# Personal Responsibility Through Mentoring

By: *Kevin Kuczynski, MA, LLPC, SLC, BRPC*

Significant growth at Cousino High School in Warren, Mich., has triggered the need for school professionals to generate new and innovative programs to meet the needs of students.

I believe that high schools across the country need to pay special attention to ninth-grade students. These students are faced with a new athletic and social environment, increased academic demand, as well as peer pressure and culture shock. At this juncture, students are expected not only to perform well academically, but also to participate in appropriate extracurricular activities if they plan to go on to college. Students who are not involved in after-school activities may struggle both socially and academically. Worse yet, these students are at even greater risk of potential alcohol and/or drug use.

To support incoming freshmen at Cousino High School, I created an innovative and successful program called Club Connect, which helps freshmen adjust to the demands of high school through mentoring and personal responsibility. This program also serves as a way to connect students to one another as well as to the clubs, sports and activities that Cousino High School has to offer. Essentially, Club Connect encourages academic responsibility, student-to-student connection and school involvement.

The premise was that freshmen would best be served by being mentored by upperclassmen (juniors and seniors).

Many attributes define a student who becomes a mentor: they are not only successful in their academics, but also participate in after-school activities; they show leadership skills and are respectful, dependable, responsible and creative; and, above all else, they have a desire to help freshmen transition to high school.

Prospective mentors for the program were given a five-day window to apply in April, in preparation for the upcoming school year. They had to complete a series of short-answer questions and get three teacher recommendations. This short application window was necessary in order to have a program where the students would take the lead in the mentoring process. This was important because when students take ownership, they know their suggestions matter and they feel valued. These applications are then reviewed by three teachers, and 60 to 70 mentors with the highest scores are chosen from a pool of 100+ applicants.

These 60 to 70 mentors participate in an extensive mentor training series to guide them through some of the obstacles they might face when working with their freshmen mentees. A variety of topics are covered including: mentor expectations, mentor roles and mentoring success tips. I spend a great deal of the three-hour mentor training session, reinforcing the above topics through role play. I have found that although discussion is great, role play makes it more real and forces the mentors to discuss as a group how to best manage various mentoring situa-

tions. It is the role of the mentor to help these students discover that they can help themselves, thus giving them the personal responsibility to make informed decisions that will impact their future high school years.

Just a few days prior to the start of the new school year the mentors welcome the students to Cousino and assist them and their parents in the registration process and encourage them to become part of Club Connect. Also, parents are given an informational pamphlet explaining Club Connect, and have opportunity to sign up their child to have a mentor. All students must have permission from their parent or guardian. This past year we had a little more than 35 percent of the freshmen class being mentored (about 140 students). We have chosen the program to focus around getting students connected to high school instead of being focused solely on academics. This design was necessary in order to keep the freshmen engaged in the mentoring process. The belief was that if the focus was solely academic in nature, students would be turned off to the mentoring process, and thus, not be willing to engage or invest in it.

Upon completion of registration, the mentors and mentees all complete personal profiles. These profiles are used to pair the upperclassmen with the freshmen, based on common interests. This serves as a foundation so communication can begin to establish their mentoring relationship.

Beginning the second week of school, the freshmen meet with their upperclassmen mentors every two to three weeks during the school day. The students and their mentors meet on a rotating basis so they do not miss the same class too often. During these sessions a variety of subjects are addressed: study skills, diversity, school clubs, sports teams, problem solving, communication, teamwork, scheduling for 10th grade and career planning, among others. These sessions allow for time to focus on the topic of that week's mentoring session, while also providing time to interact socially, so the mentoring relationships can flourish.

These mentoring sessions eventually led to the creation of a steering committee, which includes six mentors (two sophomores, two juniors and two seniors) and two counselors. The committee meets every four to six weeks to evaluate past mentoring sessions, plan upcoming events and work through any concerns heard from other mentors or mentees. Mentors get together with their mentees most days outside of school, and have meetings during school every two to three weeks so they can really shape the program as each session is planned. This interaction between mentors and mentees is used to tailor each session to best meet the needs of the freshmen. The steering committee has significantly increased the success of the program because the mentors can speak on behalf of the freshmen, thus giving them a voice when they are reluctant to share their thoughts in a group setting.

The program concludes near the end of March. This was designed so students are then able to transition from relying on their mentors, to being personally responsible for their school work, grades

and school involvement, thus preparing the freshmen to excel in the 10th grade. I believe this philosophy has been key to the program's success because, more often than not, high schools around the country seek to implement programs to "save" the student. Interventions such as retaking tests, extra credit and free credit recovery only seek to save the student without addressing the skills that the students lack. In society and in the workplace adults are required to be responsible for their actions. We, as high schools, need to expect the same level of personal responsibility from students, and if we equip them with these skills, they can overcome obstacles on their own through personal responsibility. Club Connect excels because of the relationships the students make with one another. Kids learn better from their peers when it is in a controlled environment. According to Tom, one of our senior mentors, "Mentoring works because it is a good way for ninth-graders to bond with someone older and more mature."

The freshmen say they are more involved and more relaxed because of mentoring. The mentors are able to say, "I've been there and done that . . ." or "here are some study tips to help with your math class." These growth opportunities have allowed freshmen to develop relationships; have accountability; and get on track right from the outset into their high school years.

In the five years that Club Connect has existed, I have been awed by the success of the program. In any given year, 92 to 97 percent of freshmen involved in the program have passed their classes. Although academic success is important, the reality is that the changes in the lives of both the mentors and mentees as a result of the

mentoring relationships are immeasurable. Students have joined school clubs, made various athletic teams, enhanced relationships and excelled in the classroom because of this mentoring program.

The year concludes with a Celebration Breakfast for mentors and their parents. We honor the children who serve as mentors for the past school year and present them with a gift to show our appreciation for their commitment and sacrifice. We emphasize that the program thrives because of the committed mentors who run the program. It's a great time to thank them for their hard work.

Club Connect is successful because of the selected upperclassmen mentors who drive the program and work with the freshman students. We are now starting to see kids who were mentees in their freshman year become the mentors running the program as upperclassmen. This is a true measure of the program's success, which shows that if personal responsibility is the focus and accountability itself is achieved through relationships, then results in the classroom will occur.

A freshmen and her mentor, Kristen, put it best, stating: "Mentoring works because we want it to." There is no substitute for promoting personal responsibility and a successful mentoring program can turn that dream for some schools into a contagious reality.



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