

Community and Family-Community Programs

SNAPSHOT

Program:

Wicomico Mentoring Project

District:

Wicomico County Public Schools

Location:

Salisbury, Md., and surrounding area

Grades: PreK-12

Enrollment: 14,400 students in the district, including 754 WMP students

Free/reduced-price lunch: 85% of WMP students

Developing volunteer mentors

Wicomico Mentoring Project

Wicomico County Public Schools

Wicomico County, Maryland

In 1994, the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce, the Wicomico County Board of Education, and a group of business and professional leaders called the Greater Salisbury Committee, began looking for a way to help raise high school graduation rates. Together, they formed a task force that came up with the idea of a mentorship program for students at risk of school failure. With funding from an AmeriCorps grant, the task force hired Henrietta Parker to administer the Wicomico Mentoring Project (WMP).

This one-on-one mentoring program, which Parker continues to oversee, has grown from 27 mentors in three schools to 754 mentors serving the county's 26 schools. Mentors include college students and volunteers from more than 50 local government agencies, businesses, civic organizations, and faith-based groups, as well as the schools themselves. In fact, 55 percent of the mentors are teachers or education support professionals. The superintendent also serves as a mentor.

How the program works

The Wicomico Mentoring Project is funded by the Wicomico County Board of Education as part of the Student Services Team. Its 11-member Advisory Board is comprised of mentors from a range of backgrounds. The project coordinator and two staff work closely with coordinators at each school. Students are referred to the program by teachers, guidance staff, or others who know them well. Mentors choose a school—usually based on proximity to home or workplace—and commit to meeting one hour per week for the school year.



Mentors act as role models and provide support for students' social, emotional, and academic growth. They can sit in class with their student, read, play board games, eat lunch together, take a walk and talk together, or do whatever is comfortable. WMP schedules summer activities for students and mentors, such as roller-skating, baseball games, and field trips.

Mentors undergo a background check and two hours of training. They also receive a toolkit that includes ice breakers, activities, and other resources. Supplemental training with other mentoring programs is also available.

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Mentoring may begin at any grade level and may continue through high school. Currently, about half of the mentored students are in elementary school, a third are in middle school, and the rest are in high school. Of the students being mentored, 69 percent are African American, 27 percent are white, and 5 percent are Hispanic. The school district as a whole is about 55 percent white, 37 percent African American, and 7 percent Hispanic, Asian, or other.

The WMP annual budget (\$177,000 for 2009-2010) covers salaries for the project coordinator and two staff, as well as materials, mentor background checks, and printing. In addition, the Advisory Board raises about \$6,000 in community donations each year to cover the cost of activities, food, and transportation.

Evidence of effectiveness

- ▶ Data for the 2009-2010 school year show that compared to the previous year, 41 percent of WMP students had improved grades, 46 percent had improved attendance, and 27 percent showed improved behavior.
- ▶ The 2010 graduation rate for mentored high school seniors was 99 percent. For the school district as a whole, the graduation rate rose from 78.7 percent in 2009 to 83 percent in 2010.
- ▶ Survey data shows that 75 percent of mentored students' teachers saw personal growth, 73 percent saw improved work habits and effort, and 72 percent saw improved academic achievement.
- ▶ Among parents surveyed, 92 percent saw improved work habits in their mentored children; 91 percent said their child had a positive feeling about the mentor; and 89 percent observed personal growth in their child.

- ▶ The Wicomico Mentoring Project has won numerous awards, including the 2008 Leadership Award in Education from the Shore Leadership Alumni Association and a First Place Award of Excellence from the Office of the Attorney General's Spotlight on Prevention. In addition, America's Promise Alliance, a national network that aims to ensure that all young people graduate from high school ready for college, named Wicomico County one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People in 2010—the fourth time the county has received this recognition.

Exemplary practices

Using targeted outreach: Students are usually referred to the WMP by their guidance counselors for reasons such as poor attendance, lack of self-confidence, delinquent behavior, or life circumstances that limit involvement of their parents. Referrals also come from teachers, parents, and even students themselves.

Building community support and buy-in: A monthly newsletter includes information, a calendar of events, and resources for mentors. News of activities, profiles of participants, and inspiring quotes help to build support and buy-in from current and potential mentors.

Developing personal relationships: The training program helps mentors form reliable relationships that help motivate and support the students. Mentors make a one-year commitment, which they may choose to renew at the end of the school year. More than 20 WMP mentors have remained active for 5 to 15 years. Feedback from students and mentors shows that more than 90 percent are satisfied with their pairing. Ninety-four percent of students reported a great or good relationship with their mentor, and 97 percent wanted to keep their mentor for the next year.

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Outlook

Demand for WMP mentors is high: In addition to those in the program, another 1,070 eligible students are on a waiting list. Recognizing the potential for other districts to replicate the program, Parker has shared information and copies of the toolkit with other counties.

Association perspective

As the local Association president, Dave White, puts it: “The Wicomico County Education Association is a critical WMP partner organization, and many of its members—including classroom teachers and education support professionals—serve as mentors. The Association and district have worked out an agreement that allows school staff the necessary time to mentor students.”

Local contacts

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Related information

WMP website: www.wcboe.org/programs/mentoring

Report card: <http://bit.ly/qxJwX1>

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