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Easter, Brittney A., "Significance of mentoring students in public schools: A literature review and naturalistic observation of academic & socio-emotional implications" (2015). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 422.

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Significance of mentoring students in public schools: A literature review and naturalistic
observation of academic & socio-emotional implications

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Across the country, school systems are becoming increasingly diverse in their student populations. Students differ on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status. While this diversity can lead to positive social outcomes, it also can create the issue of achievement gaps. Differences at home, in development, and in the school itself can present students with many challenges, placing some learners behind others in the classroom. A great deal of research regarding the success of mentoring has been published. Mentoring programs have the ability to provide support for students who are struggling academically or socially by providing one-on-one attention, skills, and encouragement. This research, in conjunction with the recent formation of the Academic Success Academy (ASA) at South Kingstown High School, demonstrates the benefit of mentoring programs. Based on this literature review and naturalistic observation of ASA students, academic and socio-emotional problems would lessen in schools if a greater number of mentoring programs were implemented.

College completion rates in the United States are currently at a very low rate. At four-year institutions, less than sixty percent of students are able to graduate within six years (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013, p. 93). Many educators attribute these low numbers to lack of college readiness at time of high school graduation. In primary and secondary education, school faculty and staff are not always able to accommodate or even recognize academic struggles. Increasing class sizes make it challenging for teachers to provide individual attention to students or slow down a lesson. These delays may result from a range of learning disabilities to problems being faced at home. Scholastic challenges often lead to frustration or even lowered self-esteem. As this cycle continues throughout a student's educational journey, the problems worsen. Only one-third of students complete high school at a college-ready level. This lack of preparedness causes 35 to 40 percent of entering freshmen to be enrolled into remedial or developmental courses, which include counseling and tutoring (Bettinger et al., 2013, p. 93). While these courses do provide necessary support for the many

new challenges that college invokes, they are very costly to both the student and institution. Students are often not receiving credit towards their degree, yet have to include the course in their schedule. In addition, the university must hire and pay staff to teach these courses. For some freshmen, remediation courses are detrimental to their self-esteem. Delay in education can be frustrating and cause students to feel as though they lack intelligence. This exasperation leads to greater college drop-out rates, preventing students from ever completing their education or doing so in a lengthier manner (Bettinger et al., 2013, p. 94). The answer to this snowball effect is earlier intervention. Mentoring in high school, or at a primary education level, can provide preparation for these obstacles. By teaching organizational skills, scheduling techniques, and motivating students to succeed, students entering college can be better prepared.

Mentoring programs, whether led by college students, school staff, or volunteer parents, has the ability to enhance a student's academic career. Studies comparing students who receive academic support to those who do not take part in such programs exhibit an inverse relationship. Mentored students earn more credits and have higher GPAs (Bettinger et al., 2013, p. 104). Even students who are failing classes are able to bring their grades to a passing level through the tutoring that mentoring programs can provide (Allen & Chavkin, p.7). The majority of this improved cognition can be attributed to the individual attention that mentoring allows for. In turn, students are able to ask questions they may not feel comfortable asking in front of peers, have extra practice, and receive the individualized attention that may not be available in class or at home. These academic improvements have a significant effect on a students' well-being. Not only do they become motivated, but also may have increased self-esteem due to their achievements (Grubbs & Boes, 2009, p. 21). As tutoring continues, a student is able to become more successful (Allen & Chavkin, p. 16).

The newly discovered sense of capability that mentoring provides also fosters a sense of school-connectedness for students. According to Bettinger et al. (2013), "...students who feel academically capable and connected to their institution are more likely to stay enrolled" (p.103). Therefore, it is vital that mentoring programs possess elements of school connectedness in addition to academic tutoring. For a holistic educational experience, students should feel as though they belong in their school environment. This includes having peer support and feeling enthusiastic about their class work. Again, early intervention is necessary. Students are more likely to feel connected to their school if it is felt during the earlier years of education. Lack of this attachment can lead to bullying, fighting, stealing, vandalism, and drug use (McQuillin, Smith & Strait, 2011, p. 848). This is due to a sense of hopelessness and lack of support. However, mentoring programs can intervene and alter these emotions. By promoting positive development and encouraging students to try new activities, students can discover ways that make them feel excited to be at school.

This relationship between academic growth and school connectedness is supported by the Comer model. According to Drake (1995), success cannot be achieved unless educational skills are accessed beyond classroom limitation. Theorists who support this belief encourage parental figures to help students with homework, studying techniques, etc. For parents of children in low-income communities, this is seemingly impossible due to the many economic and emotional stressors being faced (Grant, Farahmand, Meyerson, Dubois, Tolan, Gaylord-Harden... Duffy, 2014, p. 225). In addition, adolescence is a time of independence. Students may be making of their own decisions, and non-parental adults often have a greater influence (Hurd, Varner & Rowley, 2012, p.1584). This is why mentoring is so important. Mentors have the ability to fill in the gaps that parents and educators are unable to and better students both academically and psychologically. The Comer model demonstrates that school connectedness has been show to improve grades, student behavior, and improved parental

inclusion (Drake, 1995, p. 316). Holistically, mentoring can lead to a great deal of academic enhancement and emotional improvements.

In South Kingstown, Rhode Island, a large portion of teenagers attend the public South Kingstown High School (SKHS). Like many public schools, the student body is quite diverse. Approximately 10-17 percent of SKHS students are living in poverty. As a result, they are at an increased risk for delays in "...academic engagement, achievement, and school completion" (Grant et al., 2014, p. 222). Assistant Principal Robert Young and associate professor at URI, Dr. Diane Kern, saw a need for a program that would connect these impoverished youth to college students. By doing so, these struggling students would receive aid in tutoring, mentoring, and college readiness. Along with a small team of undergraduate students at URI, the Academic Success Academy (ASA) was created in September 2014.

ASA occurs from 2-4 PM during the school week with the exception of holidays and college breaks. Mentors of the program must complete specific requirements throughout the semester in order to receive credits towards their college degree. Mentor "leaders," most of who originally helped create ASA, are asked to meet with Dr. Kern regularly so that communication is open and new ideas can be shared. The majority of these mentoring college students either want to become educators, or have an interest in working with children in some form. Their college majors range from social sciences to mathematics, ensuring that the interests and skills provided for mentees is diverse. On a typical ASA day, mentors sign in at the main office upon arrival and wait for students to arrive once their school day is complete. Students who come to ASA are asked to sign into a book in the classroom. Greeting conversations take place between all mentors and mentees to make sure students feel comfortable. In addition, this allows mentors to get a sense of the mentees' emotional state and receive any information that may be helpful to the students' success that day. Mentors then ask students about assignments and assist them in completion. Although doing

homework is not required by ASA mentees, it is highly encouraged. Once homework is finished, recreation time takes place. Students and mentors play card or board games, enjoy creative activities, and more. For some mentees, this can be a conversation time as well. Mentors and students are able to form relationships, share advice, and relate to one another. A mentor is not only a tutor, but also a coach, guide, role model, advocate, and friend. Therefore, a sense of trust and compassion is vital. Before leaving, students are asked to fill out an exit ticket. This includes what the student enjoyed about ASA that day, things they found helpful, or ideas for the future of the program. As ASA has grown, mentors and school faculty have created new programming to meet students' interests. These groups are lead by mentors and SKHS staff during the allotted ASA time. Mentees whom are curious about computers may choose to participate in Tech Tuesday, where they can learn about functioning and technology. On Mondays, students who enjoy leisurely reading are lead in a discussion regarding a specific book that mentees and mentors have read. Fridays are art showcase days, where students are encouraged to share any form of art they've created or are interested in. This encourages sharing and emotional openness.

Students have come to ASA for a wide range of reasons. Mentees have struggles that range from learning disabilities and failing grades to parental abuse and lack of support at home. While the problems may be diverse, the success of ASA is unquestionable. Mentors have seen individual improvements in all students, and mentees have recognized positive changes within themselves. Academically, students who were once failing the entirety of their courses are now earning passing grades. Those who were once told they will be held back in certain classes will now be able to continue moving on with their education. Emotionally and socially, the improvements are astounding. With the guidance and motivation that mentors have provided, students have been able to identify personal strengths and discover that they have a purpose in life. Some students want to spread positivity and

contribute to the world, whether this is in form of a career or being a mentor themselves. Many attendees have voiced their appreciation of having an adult who believes in their abilities. They have increased self-esteem and have become optimistic about their futures. Of the six regular attendees of ASA, four have a goal of attending a college or university, and all have aspirations of job success and becoming financially stable. Students who once were getting disciplined daily are now gaining a sense of responsibility and respect for authority. Others who had fears of social interactions are more confident and trusting of peers. They have gained the friendships of not only mentors, but of their fellow ASA mentees. Although ASA is only in its first year, it has exhibited success in the form of academic and socio-emotional growth. Mentors and mentees have greatly benefitted from the program, and the future of ASA is promising.

Increased class sizes and greater diversity within school populations make it difficult for educators to meet individual needs of all students. Mentoring programs have the ability to greatly improve students' educational experiences. Literature demonstrates the correlation between academic & social emotional support with improved grades, greater likelihood of graduation, higher self-esteem, and improved school connectedness (Grubbs & Boes). ASA itself has exhibited the success that mentoring programs can foster. In only a short six months, vast changes have occurred within mentees. This research supports the belief that mentoring programs should be implemented in all schools across the country. Providing support for students will benefit school systems, universities, parents, and students themselves.

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