

Chapter 8.7

Mentoring the Next Generation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the high school dropout rate in the United States at epidemic levels and the proportion of guidance counselors decreasing, mentoring programs are an increasingly effective way to reach young people with the college and career guidance they need. icouldbe.org's online mentoring programs reach young people who do not have access to quality educational resources, using a dynamic virtual learning environment to connect them to mentors who offer practical and individualized advice, information and expertise. The organization's award-winning program is grounded on an evidence-based curriculum that is student-paced and student-led, placing young people at the center of a community of classroom teachers and adult mentors invested in the their futures. icouldbe.org puts child safety first and monitors mentor-mentee relationships in a controlled and accountable environment. Evidence indicates that icouldbe.org's e-mentoring program has many of the benefits of face-to-face mentoring--an exciting find as educators turn to mentoring as a classroom intervention.

BACKGROUND

Every nine seconds, a high school student in the United States drops out of school. Approximately one-third of high school students in public school will not graduate (Bridgeland, 2006). Add another challenge, like being an ethnic minority, coming from a low-income neighborhood, having a

disability--even living in a city--and the odds of finishing school are even slimmer (NCES, 2002).

To make matters worse, the proportion of guidance counselors throughout the public school system is steadily decreasing, with one guidance counselor often responsible for over 500 students (McDonough, 2005). Students cite a lack of adult concern and involvement in their lives, as well as school seeming irrelevant, as key reasons for dropping out (Lehr, 2004). Even if they do graduate,

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studies show that ethnic minorities and students from low-income families continue to face barriers to college access (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Experts agree that education is the cornerstone of young people's futures and a crucial step in breaking a cycle of poverty that can impact generations. How do we reach at-risk young people with the support and encouragement they need, not just to stay in school, but to work towards a better future?

With the United States high school dropout rate at epidemic proportions, Adam Aberman, an educator with a history of working with at-risk youth in challenging situations, knew that something needed to be done. He saw firsthand the disparities between high- and low-income students' access to educational opportunities and professional direction and sought to innovate a way to connect young people with committed adults who could provide them with career and college guidance. He wanted to create a scalable solution that would give them the support they need.

Aberman recognized that at-risk young people are missing the role models and mentors that would inform and encourage them to make strong decisions about their futures. He believed that young people need experienced adults to help steer them towards their dreams. In low-income neighborhoods where one or both parents often work long hours and may have no college experience themselves, an outside adult can be crucial in raising young people's expectations of themselves, setting life goals, and helping them to learn and practice the skills to achieve them.

Connecting young people to mentors, Aberman realized, was the ideal solution. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center, mentoring programs are consistently correlated with improved school achievement, increased graduation rates, self-esteem and school attendance, a decrease in discipline referrals and early pregnancy rates, and even associated with an increase in the rate that young people secure entry-level jobs and perform community service. One study finds that students from low-income communities that show poor

achievement and low self-expectations can potentially benefit the most from mentoring programs (Myers and Schrim, 1999).

Traditionally, mentoring programs have connected students and adults in environments where they meet regularly at a specific place and time. But putting school children and adult professionals in face-to-face relationships is both logistically challenging and a child protection risk. Although success stories across the United States are plentiful, traditional mentoring programs demand high levels of outside supervision and intense program administration. There is also the challenge of sourcing available and motivated mentors from the local area. For these reasons, bringing existing programs to scale is expensive and demands a large on-the-ground program staff. Traditionally, the benefits of mentoring carry a heavy administrative and personnel cost that often slow its growth as a scalable educational intervention.

Aberman was already serving as the Brooklyn Field Representative for the New York City Board of Education and had worked as a bilingual teacher in Los Angeles and a volunteer in Boston's inner-city charter schools. He knew that traditional mentoring programs are logistically challenging and expensive to implement. He was convinced that mentoring programs could keep young people focused on their goals, but knew there must be a better way to implement them.

By 2000, the Internet was already revolutionizing social interactions and learning spaces. Aberman wanted to bring that reach to the rapidly growing field of mentoring. What if the Internet could become the platform where students and their mentors connected? That way, young people could get the most out of potential mentors and pick someone that suited their unique goals and needs--not just someone who was available to meet them after school in their neighborhood once a week. Mentees and mentors could even live on opposite sides of the country--it wouldn't matter. Even better, an online program could be effectively

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