

# Mentoring Partnerships

“*Education is about preparing young people to make the world better than it is.*”

—Pedro Noguera, 2011

Youth mentoring programs are bigger than ever. More than three million young people have a Big Brother or Big Sister, or a similar mentor who is involved in their lives in some way. Mentoring expert and psychologist Jean Rhodes (2008) notes that mentoring has undergone a six-fold increase from just a decade ago, fueled, to some extent, by generous federal funding. But need has driven the development of youth mentoring programs as well. Mentoring helps young people succeed by establishing supportive and beneficial relationships between youth and caring adults. Mentoring programs promote positive individual development, improved self-esteem, better social skills, and knowledge of career opportunities. Youth involved in mentoring programs are also less likely to drop out of school or use unhealthy substances, and are more likely to pursue higher education. The research suggests that when done well, mentoring offers a child the promise of focused goals and long-term success.

Traditionally, mentoring programs served as interventions to counteract risky behaviors such as school dropout, youth violence, adolescent pregnancy, and drug and alcohol use. Today, mentoring has gone mainstream and is regarded as one component of a multi-pronged, comprehensive youth development strategy (Foster, 2001). While mentoring still plays a key role in helping students avoid harmful behavior and attitudes, it's also widely employed in schools and classrooms across the states, often to provide students with yet another layer of academic support and guidance.

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**“There are currently 18 million children in the United States who want and need a mentor, but only three million have one.”**

—MENTOR Fact Sheet, 2012



## The Challenges Our Students Face

For more than 20 years, The National Mentoring Partnership (MENTOR) has been the leading champion for youth mentoring in the United States, serving young people between the ages of 6 and 18. According to MENTOR, there are “currently 18 million children in the United States who want and need a mentor, but only three million have one.” MENTOR’S mission is “to close that gap so that every one of those 15 million children has a caring adult in their life.”

### The Statistics of Need

MENTOR believes that the thoughtful, sensitive guidance of a caring adult mentor can help each child realize and reach his or her full potential. Research demonstrates that youth who participate in mentoring relationships experience a multitude of positive benefits—and the need is high for the extra support mentors provide. More than 8,000 young people drop out of school every day, and African American and Latino males are hit the hardest (Child Trends, 2012). Pedro Noguera (2011) outlines the facts surrounding our troubling dropout challenge:

#### Why Students Drop Out

Of those students who drop out, 47% maintain that they are bored, unmotivated, and disengaged.

Why?

- Poor teaching—teachers rely primarily on lecture, drill, test prep
- Unsatisfactory remedial courses—students are treated as though they are dumb; there’s no plan to connect students to more challenging academic programs
- Unchallenging curriculum—what students learn is not connected to their lives

Of those students who drop out, 43% do so because they are behind in credits as they’ve missed too many days of school.

Why?

- Stress in the household and lack of support at home
- Lack of connection with adults at school
- School has no plan to help students to catch up
- Distraction of misguided peers—pull of the streets

Of those students who drop out, 35% explain that they were failing their classes and were unprepared for high school.

Why?

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- Weak literacy skills
- Lack of reading specialists at high school level
- Lack of organization skills, time management
- Low esteem due to lack of competence
- Lack of clear future goals

Of those students who drop out, 32% leave school to work—this is especially true for immigrant students.

Why?

- Immigrant youth feel pressure to work to support themselves and their families
- Kids in poverty are faced with tough choices related to supporting family and self (Bridgeland et al., 2006)

## Mentors Can Help

The research base is substantial and convincing; multiple studies demonstrate that mentors help young people develop social skills and emotional well-being, improve cognitive skills, bolster their self-confidence, and plan for the future. High-quality mentoring also results in better attendance at school, lowers dropout rates, and decreases involvement with drugs and violent behavior. In short, quality mentoring works (Rhodes, 2008).

### Academic Support

Perhaps the most active and widely known role for volunteer mentors is that of academic counselor; providing guidance and explicit help with academic challenges and homework. The facts suggest the immediate benefits of this guidance:

- Mentors help keep students in school.
- Students who meet regularly with their mentors are 52% less likely than their peers to skip a day of school and 37% less likely to skip a class (Tierney et al., 1995).
- Mentors help with homework and can improve their mentees' academic skills.

And consider the benefits of extensive reading. As important as early language experience is for establishing a child's learning trajectory, reading experience is also critical for the academic development of students beyond third grade. In a series of carefully constructed studies, Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) isolated the benefits of reading experience from the effects of other factors. They found that, even among students with weaker reading skills, extensive reading was linked to superior performance on measures

“A growing body of research confirms what we instinctively know to be true—that a caring adult can make a big difference in a child's future. Mentors serve as role models, advocates, friends, and advisors.”

—MENTOR

## 10 Extra Minutes of Reading

Percentile Rank	Minutes of Reading Per Day	Baseline- Words Read Per Year	Plus 10 Minutes- Words Read Per Year	Percentage Increase in Word Exposure
98	65.0	4,358,000	5,028,462	15%
90	21.1	1,823,000	2,686,981	47%
80	14.2	1,146,000	1,953,042	70%
70	9.6	622,000	1,269,917	104%
60	6.5	432,000	1,096,615	154%
50	4.6	282,000	895,043	217%
40	3.2	200,000	825,000	313%
30	1.8	106,000	694,889	556%
20	0.7	21,000	321,000	1429%
10	0.1	8,000	Based on reading level: ~ 300,000 words	
2	0	0		

*Distribution of time spent reading books outside of school, with estimated words read per year and projection of increased words per year if each child's average daily time spent reading were increased by ten minutes. Adapted from Adams (2006), with baseline data from Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding (1988).*

of general knowledge, vocabulary, spelling, verbal fluency, and reading comprehension.

### Differences in Print Exposure

Despite its importance, students' exposure to print also varies widely. In a study of the out-of-school activities of fifth graders, Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found that time spent reading books was the best predictor of a student's reading proficiency. They also noted that many of the students in the study rarely read books on their own; indeed, around 20% of the students devoted less than a minute per day to book reading. It's easy to see how access to a reading mentor could help turn this around.

### Life Skills Support

Then, too, young people often need guidance on how to achieve day-to-day successful living:

- Mentors help improve a young person's self-esteem.
- Mentors provide support for students trying new behaviors.
- Youth who meet regularly with their mentors are 46% less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs and 27% less likely to start drinking.
- About 40% of a teenager's waking hours are spent without companionship or supervision. Mentors provide teens with a valuable place to spend free time.

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- Mentors teach young people how to relate well to all kinds of people and help them strengthen communication skills (Tierney et al., 1995).
- Chicago's federally funded Child-Parent Centers have served 100,000 three- and four-year-olds from low-income neighborhoods since 1967. Research shows that similar children were 70 percent more likely to have been arrested for a violent crime by age 18 than those who attended the program. This program will have prevented an estimated 33,000 crimes by the time the children already served reach the age of 18 (Brazelton et al., 2003).

## Preventing Dropouts

A caring adult mentor over a prolonged period of time can make all the difference in changing a student's mind about dropping out. Indeed, multiple studies reveal a correlation between a young person's involvement in a quality mentoring relationship and positive outcomes in school, mental health, problem behavior, and health—all factors that can influence staying in school and graduating (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). Research shows that mentoring helps combat two early indicators of high school dropouts: high levels of absenteeism (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007) and recurring behavior problems (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002). Students don't make snap decisions to drop out of school; it's a long process of disengagement, which often begins in elementary school with the students' first experiences with failure. Therefore, targeting young children with a disproportionate number of risk indicators for dropping out of high school is critical. Research suggests that children between 9 and 15 are commonly at important turning points in their lives (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008).

## Common Core Note: Close, Attentive Reading

The CCSSO stress the importance of teaching students to engage in “close, attentive reading”—to engage independently in critical reading, determining what a text says explicitly, making logical inferences, and analyzing a text's craft and structure to determine how those affect the text's meaning and tone. Students also evaluate the effectiveness or value of the text, and use the information and ideas drawn from texts—“text evidence”—as the basis of their own arguments, presentations, and claims.

## Mentoring Partnerships That Work

Not all mentoring programs are equally successful and effective. Program quality is critical, of course. Let's look at other mentoring programs with a proven track record of success beyond the positive evaluation of Big Brothers and Big Sisters (Tierney et al. 1995).

### SMILE

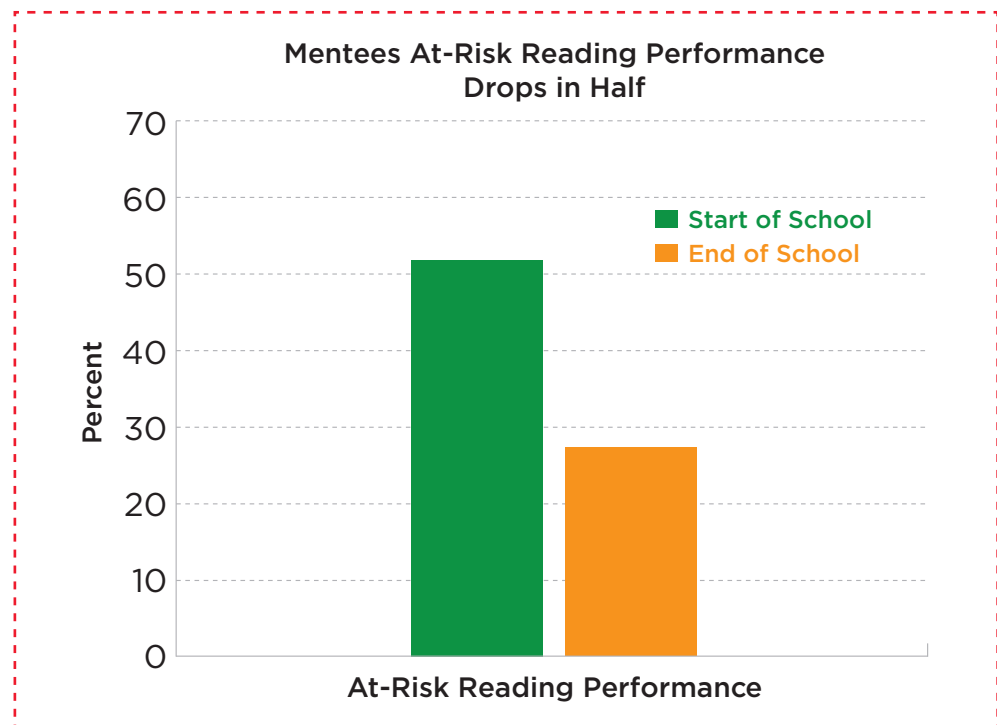
The **S**tudy of **M**entoring in the **L**earning **E**nvironment (**SMILE**) is a large-scale, randomized study of school-based adult mentoring for students 10–18 years of age. By the end of the school year, students in the treatment group had attended an average of eight meetings and experienced an average match length of about three months. Small, but positive, main effects of mentoring were found on self-reported connectedness to peers, self-esteem, and social support from friends. There were no impacts on other areas, including grades and social skills. Analyses of subgroups found those who received the added mentoring component had experienced

significant positive impacts. Among elementary school boys the positive impacts were demonstrated in connectedness to school, connectedness to culturally different peers, empathy, cooperation, and hopefulness. For high school girls, positive effects included connectedness to culturally different peers, global self-esteem, self-in-the-present, and support from friends (Karcher, 2008).

### Third Grade Reads

National assessments of education progress show that too many of our nation's children are failing to meet reading level proficiency by the beginning of fourth grade, especially in urban schools serving a majority of low-income students. And that's a serious challenge because students who do not reach reading benchmarks by the end of third grade have a more difficult time keeping up with peers both academically and socially—which has, of course, serious implications for graduation rates, employment, and the ability to fully participate in a knowledge-based society (Lesnick et al., 2010).

Enter Third Grade Reads, a city-based initiative that draws together the mayor's office, a local nonprofit organization, the school district, and "ordinary citizens" who are willing to obtain the training needed to tutor the highest need K-3 students in reading in schools or after-school programs. This volunteer-based literacy intervention program is designed to provide struggling readers with more opportunities to read using research-based tutoring methods—helping improve student reading levels and ultimately increasing their chances of long-term educational success.





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## Barbara Bush Literacy Foundation: Trendsetters

Trendsetters, sponsored by the Barbara Bush Literacy Foundation, provides young readers with one-to-one reading attention one hour every week over the course of the school year. Trendsetters pair second and third graders who have fallen behind in reading with a teen mentor—and the results are immensely positive. The young readers benefit (see figure on page 86), but so, too, do their teen tutors, who benefit immeasurably from the experience of taking responsibility to help a younger student in need.

## Everyone Wins!

A study of the Everybody Wins! Power Lunch program in seven Washington, DC, elementary schools found that it benefited disadvantaged students who read below grade level. In this program, adults shared weekly lunchtime reading sessions with students in several schools. At the end of the school year, teachers reported that the 223 students who were evaluated (20 percent of the program participants) showed the following improvements:

- Twenty-five percent of poor readers improved their academic performance, more than double the 12 percent of control-group students
- Fifty-five percent of the students often or always enjoyed reading, compared to 31 percent in the control group
- Sixteen percent of the students improved their classroom behavior, compared to only three percent of control-group students

## In Sum

Perhaps the words of Diana Mendley Rauner, author of *They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall*, captures both the spirit and promise of mentoring:

As we reflect on the role of caring in young people's lives, what becomes clear is that youths need to grow up in a world infused with and organized by care ... . To become the caring citizens we need them to be, young people need to have made real the vision of the interdependent lives organized around public, as well as private, caregiving responsibilities ... . They must see care made the serious work of public life, rather than a private lifestyle choice. They must grow up in a community where they can both expect the constancy and trust of caring and know that such responsibility will be expected of them.

With the help of one caring mentor, a young person might grow into reading proficiency, acquire the skills he or she needs to graduate, and develop the abilities, attitudes, and understandings needed for economic well-being and full civic participation. 🧑

## Common Core Note: Struggling Readers, Complex Text, and Scaffolding

All students, including those who have fallen behind, deserve access to rich, grade level, complex text. But, in order to make this possible, many students will require thoughtful instruction and mentoring—including “effective *scaffolding*—to enable them to read at the level of text complexity required by the Common Core State Standards.” However, as the guidelines caution: “The scaffolding should not preempt or replace the text by translating its contents for students or telling students what they are going to learn in advance of reading the text; that is, the scaffolding should not become an alternate, simpler source of information that diminishes the need for students to read the text itself carefully ... . Follow-up support should guide readers in the use of appropriate strategies and habits when encountering places in the text where they might struggle, including pointing students back to the text with teacher support when they are confused or run into vocabulary problems” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2011).





The one who was to be first...  
for the part, he had to be paid a...  
and stood steadily in front of the...  
Dominic, with customer service, was...  
to the group. That didn't help. He was...  
the power of speech.

"Greetings," said Dominic. "You are...  
waiting for me and with no waiting...  
This is because the rabbit's trap," he...  
said. "I would like to make a name."

"Then speak," said Dominic.

"You're Dominic," said the other. "You...  
are spreading loneliness here and...  
you've been talking with the rabbits...  
and getting the best of them. So if you...  
your courage and your power, you...  
have been winning so we are in a...  
safety about our property. You have...  
they've assigned just a small set of...  
and those two things are well, it's...  
would like you to be our people."

was confused and his legs...  
confidence in his power to...  
made him suddenly...  
members of the group...  
and the rabbit. He...  
anyone else, so he...  
would himself why a...  
were, but now a...

I'm already late for an appointment ten miles away."

The rabbits looked so disappointed that Dominic felt a twinge of reluctant compassion. "I have an idea," he said. And he told them about Manfred Lyon, the artist he had just met down the road. "Get Mr. Lyon to paint a picture of some of you leaping in clover. Set traps in front of the picture and then hide somewhere. If Manfred Lyon's painting can fool me, it will fool your weasel and stout. And when you have them in the traps, you can dispose of them as you please. I'm sorry I can't stay to see the results. I must really be on my way. Good day to you all."

"Won't you please reconsider?" asked the spinster man.

"No."

"We'd pay you well," said another rabbit.

"I'm sorry," said Dominic.

"Then I guess we'll try your plan," said the spinster man. "Thank you ever so much for the suggestion."

"Not at all." And Dominic went on his way without waiting to see if his plan worked. His truth is what happened:

The rabbits, who already knew Manfred Lyon, found him quickly and offered him a large sum of money, plus two sacks of carrots, to paint the picture as Dominic described it. Money or no, he was as happy as Dominic for a chance to use his skill in his only two happy, and to see the villain who, as a result, after making sketches of wool ribs, is...





## Poverty, Resilience, and Hope

The challenges of poverty in our country are ever present and growing. Writing in *EdWeek*, educator and author Anthony Cody reminds us that 44% of all American children live in low-income families, and 21% live below the federal poverty level, currently set at \$22,350 a year. Imagine trying to live on such a paltry sum.

Cody (2012) shares additional troubling statistics:

- Twenty percent or more of the child population in 36 states and Washington, DC, lived in food-insecure households in 2010 (Feeding America).
- In 2011, “one in 45 children in the USA— 1.6 million children —were living on the street, in homeless shelters or motels, or doubled up with other families ...” This represents a 33% increase over the past three years. One child in 10 has experienced foreclosure across the nation, and that number is even higher in some areas (Bello, 2011).
- 2.7 million children have a parent behind bars—one in every 28 children (3.6%) has a parent incarcerated, up from one in 125 just 25 years ago. Two-thirds of these children’s parents were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses. Previous research has shown that children with fathers who have been incarcerated are significantly more likely than other children to be expelled or suspended from school—23% compared with 4% (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010).

Cody also cites the work of Dr. Victor Clarion, M.D., an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford. Clarion notes that in communities where there is violence, where children are exposed to events such as shootings in their neighborhoods, the children experience a constant environmental threat. And as Clarion explains, “contrary to some people’s belief, these children don’t get used to trauma. These events remain stressful and impact children’s physiology.” Our country’s top child trauma experts suggest that as many as one-third of our children living in our country’s violent urban neighborhoods have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) —“nearly twice the rate reported for troops returning from war zones in Iraq.” And PTSD often leads to PTSD-related attention deficit disorder with the lack of concentration, poor grades, and inability to sit still that accompany it.

Cody explains:

These students are, of course, not evenly distributed among our schools. Some schools in well-to-do neighborhoods have only a handful of the hungry, homeless, and traumatized. Schools in poor neighborhoods, however, have a large share, and teachers

must cope every day with students who are experiencing life-shaking traumas in their homes ... . The schools are supposed to stop making excuses and get the students focused on their next big test, and on going to college. Tough to do when your belly is empty (2012).

## A Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

The Comprehensive System of Learning Supports designed by UCLA researchers Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor (2008) is a cohesive and unifying framework that enables all students to succeed and thrive. Adelman and Taylor's work, developed over the course of thirty years in the field, and now extended through a partnership with Scholastic, places student learning and well-being at the center and draws in every component of support—social/emotional, physical, and academic—to create an integrated continuum of coordinated support. The goal is to move away from the fragmented approaches that have marginalized learning supports for students—leading to poor cost effectiveness (up to 25% of school budget used in limited and redundant ways) and counterproductive competition for sparse resources—to one that marshals the full strength and force of the school, family, and community.

### The Learning Supports Framework

Based on the research that details what schools need in order to effectively address barriers to learning and teaching, learning supports comprise six categories of classroom and school-wide support, each of which is organized along an integrated intervention continuum. The six categories are:

- *Enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning* (e.g., improving instruction for students who have become disengaged from learning at school and for those with mild-to-moderate learning and behavior problems)
- *Supporting transitions* (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)
- *Increasing home and school connections*
- *Responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises*
- *Increasing community involvement and support* (outreaching to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- *Facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed*

Adelman & Taylor; see: <http://rebuildingforlearning.scholastic.com/>



## Resilience

“Children who develop effective coping mechanisms for responding to stress and positively adapt in the face of adversity are said to be *resilient*—an important concept in child development and mental health theory and research.” Dr. Steve Southwick, Professor of Psychiatry, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Resilience and Dr. Linda Mayes, Arnold Gesell Professor in the Child Study Center and Professor of Epidemiology, of Pediatrics and of Psychology, both of Yale Medical School and leading authorities on resilience, remind us that “helping children develop resilience-boosting skills is critical—especially when families are confronted with economic, social, and health issues.” And to that end, one of the most reliable predictors of resilience is the strong network of social support children create and maintain when they possess the social competence to do so.

One way to help children develop the skills they need to navigate relationships at home and beyond is through literacy-based practices and materials. The bedtime story is a time-honored way to strengthen and enhance a loving relationship between a young child and parent or caregiver; it’s easy to see how engagement with books and other print or digital literary resources might work to help children build the social skills they need to successfully navigate our dynamic and fast-changing social world. “As scientists learn more about the complex interplay of genetics, development, cognition, environment, and neurobiology,” it will be possible to develop an array of interventions,

**“Everyone in the community—teachers, administrators, service providers—need to assume an all-hands-on-deck stance and work together to provide an exemplary academic experience for the community’s children.”**

—Phyllis C. Hunter, 2012

including those that are literacy-based, to enhance resilience to stress (Tominey, Leslie, Southwick, & Mayes, 2011).


In his book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012), Paul Tough characterizes resilience as *grit* and argues that the personal qualities that matter most (skills like perseverance, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism, and self-control) have more to do with *character* than with cognition. And these are skills that we can teach. Carol Dweck, a Stanford University psychologist, writing in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006), introduces her readers to two mental constructs: *fixed mindset* and *growth mindset*. As the labels suggest, people with a fixed mindset believe they come into the world with a fixed amount of intellectual firepower. They accept failure as an inevitable reflection of their cognitive limitations. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, refuse to be limited by real or imagined deficiencies of any sort. They believe that with enough hard work, perseverance, and practice, success is inevitable.

Dr. Alfred Tatum, whose research centers on helping African-American adolescent males overcome adversity, believes that placing the right text in the hands of a vulnerable teen is the key to overcoming a fixed mindset and building a mindset of growth and possibility. For Tatum, growing up in Chicago’s Ida B. Wells Homes, that book was Dick Gregory’s autobiography, a book that Tatum explains “released me from the stigma of poverty, causing me to think differently about my life and moved me to read other texts that strengthened my resolve to remain steadfast as I negotiated a community of turmoil—the Chicago housing projects in the 1970s and 1980s. Gregory’s text changed my life” (2013).

Tatum believes that vulnerable teens have lost their regard for *literacy as liberation* that earlier generations simply took for granted. Frederick Douglass’s persistent fight for literacy is legendary—when the wife of his slave master, reprimanded by her husband for teaching Douglass to read, abruptly stopped her lessons, Douglass convinced the white children on the plantation to teach him. As Douglass learned and began to read newspapers, political materials, and a wide range of books, he was exposed to a new realm of thought that led him to question and then condemn the institution of slavery. In later years, Douglass credited *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of political essays, poems, and dialogues that was widely used in American schoolrooms in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, with clarifying and defining his views on freedom and human rights. As he famously remarked, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free” (Douglass, 2003).

Hence, the power of what Tatum has termed *enabling texts*, which introduce young people to their *textual lineage* and build for them an intellectual culture in which they learn to believe in themselves





as smart, creative, capable human beings with the resilience to succeed. Like the teens Tough writes about, the adolescent African-American males with whom Tatum works succeed through their own grit, curiosity, and character, and emerge strengthened and more resourceful.

For all of us in the work of supporting our children, the goal is clear: we aim to better meet our children's needs by strengthening the connections among schools, families, and communities. Students benefit academically, emotionally, and physically when all the adults in their lives come together and form a continuous, coordinated, and collaborative circle of care around them. The research of those such as Adelman and Taylor, Tatum and Tough—together with the work of other researchers, educators, policy-makers, families, and community partners represented in this research compendium—show us how we might accomplish this worthy and vitally important goal. 🧑