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.

—Pedro Noguera, 2011
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?
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...
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.
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).

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 Study of Mentoring in the Learning Environment (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

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.
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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**Mentees At-Risk Reading Performance**

**Drops in Half**

- **Start of School**
- **End of School**

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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).