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## TeamMates: Providing Emotional and Academic Support in Rural Schools

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*Numerous studies have found that mentoring has a positive effect on students who participate in it. Mentorship for students in rural communities is both necessary and challenging given the uphill battle these schools and communities face to improve their students' academic achievement and emotional well-being. Through examining teacher, parent, and student perceptions of the TeamMates Mentoring Program in a rural Nebraska district, this study concluded that TeamMates is providing necessary social and emotional support to its mentees in rural schools, as well as encouraging them to improve their grades. However, TeamMates must continue to heighten its support of low-achieving students and to help fulfill students' long-term goals.*

**Key words:** Mentoring, rural schools, student achievement, student goals, academic support

I have never experienced someone coming into my life and having such a positive impact on me. I went from not caring about failing school, to passing grades and graduating early. I don't think I could have done this on my own and having my mentor by my side has made my high school career change drastically. (Student participant, TeamMates Mentoring Program, 2009)

Research has demonstrated that nonparental adult role models (mentors) fill an important positive niche in the growth and development of youth. Programs are expanding rapidly in schools, which provide a natural and comfortable location for youth and community partners to come together. This article explores a particular school/community partnership, implementing TeamMates, which is a Nebraska statewide mentoring program.

The psychological theory base for the importance of a significant adult in a child's development was described by Bandura (1977) who identified the importance of adult role modeling and by Bronfenbrenner (1979) who described the importance of unconditional love. As Shepard (2009) stated, "All children have a need to belong," (p. 39), and when families under stress cannot provide this belonging, the presence of a consistent, reliable, and caring mentor can support a child's development. Indeed, according to Benard (1991, 1995) the development of resiliency in children is the basis for adult-student mentoring.

The presence of at least one caring person – someone who conveys an attitude of compassion, who understands that no matter how awful a child's behavior, the child is doing the best that he or she can, given his or her

experience – provides support for healthy development and learning (Benard, 1995, p. 1).

Numerous studies have found that mentoring has a positive effect on students. In personal/social growth areas, several studies have reported a variety of benefits to students who participated in a mentoring program: For example, reduction in alcohol and drug use (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Tierney & Grossman, 1995); decreased incidence of hitting and violence towards others (Jekielek et al., 2002); less likelihood of becoming a teen parent (Jekielek et al., 2002; Mecca, 2001), and reduced odds of joining a gang (Mecca, 2001). Student mentees also had a greater sense of belonging (Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008). They showed improved relationships with others in general (Tierney & Grossman, 1995), and with peers, adults, and parents specifically (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). They were more able to express feelings and had increased self-confidence and self-esteem (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999).

Academic benefits were also reported. Students in mentoring programs showed an improved attitude towards school and school personnel (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Jekielek et al., 2002;); higher educational expectations (Sánchez et al., 2008); fewer absences (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999); fewer office referrals (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009); better grades (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Tierney & Grossman, 1995); and a decreased likelihood to repeat grades (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch (2000) concluded that "mentors can influence both the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of

adolescents' approach to school" (p. 1667), citing improvements in scholastic competence and school attendance. Mentored students were also more likely to stay in school (Mecca, 2001), graduate, enroll in post high school training and education, and be more hopeful about the future (Mentoring Institute, 2010).

Accordingly, public attention has been focused on mentoring during the past decade (Rhodes, 2002). From 1996 to 2001, there was a 40% growth in mentoring programs, and a *U.S. News and World Report* article stated that "discovering" mentoring is "the single greatest policy insight in the last century" (as cited in Grossman, 1999, p. 8). There are now many types of mentoring programs in K-12 public schools, community agencies and organizations, and higher education settings (Guetzloe, 1997). Manza (2005) reported that approximately 21% of the formal mentoring programs in the United States are either Big Brothers/Big Sisters or Girl & Boy Scouts; 20% are school-based; 20% are faith-based; 14% are workplace-based, and 9% are part of an after-school program.

Manza (2005) stated that although 17.6 million young people want or need mentors, only 3 million participated in formal one-on-one mentoring relationships. While there has been growth in the number of programs, many of these programs serve a small number of students. Several studies concluded that programs with the organizational resources and structure required to provide mentors for significantly more youth were necessary (Grossman & Garry, 1997). Manza also found that 35% of mentors thought the mentorship experience could be improved by having more materials and resources, while 30% of mentors wished to receive better training. Already, 31% of volunteers who mentor do so through educational programs (Foster-Bey, Dietz, & Grimm, Jr., 2006). Herrera (1999) stated that school-based mentoring resulted in "strong relationships that can develop within the school context and these relationships can make a difference in the lives of youth" (p. 16).

Mentorship for students in rural communities is both necessary and challenging. However, there is some concern that mentoring programs may not work in rural communities and schools. Some studies have found that rural communities fight an uphill battle to improve their students' academic achievement and emotional well-being. Herzog and Pittman (1995) described rural communities as having higher unemployment and a lower median family income compared with metropolitan areas. They found that when compared to metropolitan schools, rural schools tended to be staffed with younger, less well-educated, and less experienced teachers, while school leaders received lower pay and benefits. Beeson and

Strange (2000) added that retention of staff was a persistent problem, and teachers were expected to teach a wide range of subjects out of their certified area. Mihalynuk and Seifer (2007) explained that rural schools may have less access to the internet and public transportation, as well as fewer available community partners. According to Truscott and Truscott (2005), rural states with low population densities endure higher costs for educational services. Rural schools may have difficulties supporting an active mentorship program, since a school mentoring program is reliant on community volunteers to serve as mentors and a school staff for its operation. Additionally, any mentorship program at a rural school faces the challenge of encouraging students to achieve in an academic and economic environment with few resources. Non-urban students were found to have a significantly less positive perspective than urban students. Similarly, nonurban mentors had a significantly less positive outlook than urban mentors (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006).

Although some economic aspects of rural communities are disheartening, many rural residents have more positive viewpoints (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Some positive attributes of rural communities include primacy given to people, relationships, and family (Haas & Lambert, 1995; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Nachtigal, 1982; Seal & Harmon, 1995), resulting in a higher level of social-connectedness and community cohesiveness (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2007). In a survey contrasting how rural and urban Americans view their communities, Seebach (1992) reported that rural Americans identified themselves as having a commitment to community and providing quality of life for children. In addition, rural schools were described as having a strong sense of community and being the culture and social center of the town (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Larsh, 1983; Nachtigal, 1982; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Stern, 1994). Small schools, such as those found in rural areas, have also been found to be more academically beneficial for poor students than large schools (Howley & Howley, 2004). Despite these more positive aspects of rural communities, there is understandable concern as to whether a student mentoring program could succeed in a rural community. The purpose of the study was to examine teacher, parent and student perceptions about the TeamMates mentoring program in a rural Nebraska school district.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study used the explanatory mixed methods design. After collecting quantitative data, qualitative data were collected to further explain the quantitative results (Creswell, 2005).

### Definition of Rural

For the purposes of this study, Locale Codes provided the definition of rural. Until 2006, Johnson's Locale Codes (1989) were used to make this determination, with codes 7 and 8 described as rural schools. Based on these codes the school district examined in this study was identified as rural: based in a community or rural area with less than 2,500 population. New Urban-Centric Locale Codes based on a school's proximity to an urbanized area were adopted in 2006. The new Locale Code assignment taken from the National Center for Educational Statistics *Common Core of Data* (2010) for this school district is Town, Distant (32): a territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.

### Program Studied

This study investigated teacher, parent and student perceptions of the TeamMates program, a statewide, school-based, one-to-one mentoring program that aims to help provide support and encouragement to school-aged youth. TeamMates was initiated very informally in the 1991-1992 school year by Tom Osborne, the football coach at the University of Nebraska, who asked his players to volunteer to mentor local youth. He envisioned a program supported by adult mentors from many walks of life that would serve at-risk young people from early adolescence through high school graduation. While many mentor programs focus only on attendance, grades, social competence, and discipline, the TeamMates program also includes high school completion and post-high school education as program outcome objectives. Osborne (2000) stated, "A player 'plays' down to a lower expectation if told they won't make it. Instead they need to hear, 'I see some possibilities (n.p.).'"

The TeamMates program continued to operate informally and grew slowly until a grant was obtained in 1999 to develop the program into a formal statewide model. At the time of this study in the 2008-2009 school year, over 4000 students from 114 school districts in Nebraska and Iowa were participating in the TeamMates program (TeamMates Mentoring Program, 2009).

The TeamMates State Office provides each participating school with a TeamMates Program Management Manual (The Mentoring Institute, 2010), informing the school about how to initiate and provide the technical assistance to sustain a TeamMates program. Students are referred to the TeamMates program by teachers, principals, counselors, and parents for poor academic achievement, poor attendance, difficulty with peer relationships, school discipline issues, personal issues, or another related issue. Thus the TeamMates

program is used in schools with the expectation that students' achievement and/or behavior will improve.

Mentors are adult volunteers from within the community. They commit to mentor the student until he or she graduates from high school in order to ensure continuity for the mentee. All mentors undergo background checks and training, and the school's local program coordinator supports and monitors mentors in keeping with the TeamMates Program Manual (The Mentoring Institute, 2010). Mentors spend approximately thirty minutes to one hour a week during school time meeting with a student participating in the TeamMates program. The program coordinator works to provide resources for an array of fun or academic activities within the school grounds, including board games, sports, homework, and walks outside. Importantly, these activities are mostly selected by the student's needs and wants. Converse and Lignugaris/Kraft (2009) found that when mentors engaged in active listening and mentees chose the activities, mentoring relationships were more likely to be successful.

The ultimate goal of the TeamMates Mentorship Program is to encourage students to complete high school and increase their interest in attending a post-secondary institution after graduating. The primary tasks of a mentor are to establish a positive, personal relationship with the student; to help the student develop life skills; to assist students in obtaining additional resources; and to help students in their ability to interact with others.

### Sample

The sample comprised three groups: students participating in Teammates, their parents, and teachers involved in the Teammates program. All 16 middle school students participating in the TeamMates Mentoring Program through this particular rural school district and their parents participated in the initial survey phase of this study. Four core content teachers and a physical education/health teacher completed a survey for each student. The 16 students participating in the TeamMates Mentoring Program for whom the surveys were completed included 3 in the sixth grade, 5 in the seventh grade, and 8 in the eighth grade. Seven students participating were non-White and 9 were White/non-Hispanic. In phase 2, qualitative interviews were conducted with 8 of the 16 students: 5 girls and 3 boys. Five of the students were non-White, and three were White/non-Hispanic. Two students were in the sixth grade, 3 were in the seventh grade, and 3 were in the eighth grade. One of the male students was unable to participate because his signed letter granting permission for him to participate in the interview was not returned by the time the interviews were conducted.

## Instruments

Three surveys were used: one for teachers, one for students, and one for parents. Teachers responded to a 29-item survey, parents completed a 24-item survey, and students completed a 30-item survey. These surveys were based on The Mentoring Change Scale, which had been developed to measure changes in student behavior as a result of participation in the TeamMates program. Thus the survey items concentrated on the goals TeamMates establishes for its mentees, such as personal/social skills and future aspirations. For this study, parent, teacher, and student respondents were asked to rate student behavior observed over the past year that was due to participation in TeamMates. The scale used a 5-point Likert format for each item, with 1 representing "Strongly Disagree;" 2, "Disagree;" 3, "Neutral;" 4, "Agree;" and 5, "Strongly Agree." The teacher survey also allowed respondents to indicate the answer was "Unknown." Out of this survey data, mean scores for each item were calculated for the student, parent, and teacher surveys. These scores were reported as student, parent, and teacher means.

Survey items 1 through 21 were the same on all surveys with a minor language change on the parent survey, i.e., the survey began each item with "My child." Additionally, there was a minor language change for the student survey, i.e., each item began with "I." Item 22 on the parent and student surveys were the same as Item 28 on the teacher survey. Item 23 on the parent and student surveys was the same as Item 29 on the teacher survey. Item 24 on the parent survey was not included on the student or teacher surveys and Items 24 through 27 on the teacher survey were not included on the parent or student survey. Items 24 through 30 on the student survey were not included on the parent or teacher survey.

In addition, students were interviewed using a protocol of six open-ended questions with prompts. These questions asked the students about their favorite subjects and hobbies, the perceived impact of TeamMates on their academics, attendance, and behavior, their relationship with their mentor, what they hoped to change about themselves, and their future goals. The interviews were conducted by one external evaluator. Student answers to the questions and prompts were recorded in writing by the interviewer. The interview results were analyzed through the process of coding, which entails "categorically marking or referencing units of text with codes and labels as a way to indicate patterns and meanings" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The interview results were coded to keep track of words and phrases perceived by the researcher to have meaning, and supporting quotes were highlighted. Coding was conducted separately by two evaluators who were in agreement as to the major themes.

## Procedure

Quantitative data were gathered using surveys to assess parent, student, and teacher perceptions about all 16 students participating in a rural school district's middle school TeamMates Mentoring Program. Parent surveys were sent home with the students for their parents to complete and return. Student surveys were distributed to the students in their homeroom class during the school day. Teacher surveys were given to a team of teachers for each of the students. Individual student teacher teams were comprised of 4 core-content teachers and a physical education/health teacher familiar with the student. The survey was designed to be completed by respondents in no more than 10 minutes. To maintain confidentiality, surveys contained only the student identification number. Qualitative data were collected from 8 of the 16 students using interviews. These 8 students were selected to be interviewed based on gender, free/reduced lunch, ethnicity, and grade level.

## Results

The following themes were derived from the analysis of the data: social and emotional support, academic achievement, and planning for the future.

### Social and Emotional Support

Students in this rural school district indicated mostly positive reactions to the TeamMates program's social and emotional aspects. The mean for the survey items, "I like my mentor," "I am comfortable when I'm with my mentor," and "I can trust my mentor" was 5.00, meaning that all of the respondents strongly agreed with these statements. Teachers and parents were also aware of these positive relationships. The statement that the student liked his or her mentor elicited the highest average response from teachers (4.60) and an even higher response from parents (4.73). Parents also for the most part strongly agreed with the statement, "I'm glad my child is in TeamMates" (4.75).

Most of the students described their relationships with their mentors as comfortable and fun. In addition, the majority of students felt that they have learned to not be so shy and to speak out more. Students gave very high responses to the statements "I feel good about myself" (4.63) and "I have made friends at school" (4.63). A male student said, "Yes, I'm better at talking with other people about things." The most common statement made by the students was that they enjoyed talking with their mentor. A female student explained, "TeamMates helped me with my homework and I can talk to someone. It's really nice. We play a lot of board games, walk outside, and play basketball. It gets me away from school a bit and refreshes my memory."

The highest mean responses from parents were to the statements that the student does not smoke, drink alcohol, or do drugs (4.94). Students unanimously and strongly agreed with these statements as well (5.00). Teachers seemed more skeptical and gave lower responses – 4.40 to smoking, 4.00 to alcohol and drugs – but still generally agreed that the students did not engage in these behaviors. Students were much more likely to feel that they made good choices (4.50) compared to teachers (3.31) and parents (4.00). However, teachers agreed that the student “respects others around him/herself” (4.06) and “exhibits a cooperative behavior” (3.88). Two students credited their TeamMates mentors with helping them be more successful outside of school by encouraging them to reflect upon their problems and analyze them for the most appropriate solution.

### Academic Achievement

A disparity appeared in the interviews between students who were classified as high achievers and the students who were in the lower achievement range. Students with average to above average achievement (grade point average at or above 2.5) were more likely to feel that TeamMates created a positive change for them, for example, “My mentor gives me confidence and they understand.” By contrast, students in the lower achievement range provided more negative comments about the program. As one female student said, “They need to lay off sometimes.” Additionally, when asked for a favorite subject, students with lower achievement tended to name a subject they enjoyed, such as reading, but would add: “I’m not good at reading.”

It is clear, however, that academic achievement remains important to these students. Students for the most part stated that they liked school (3.87). Interestingly, compared to teacher means, students rated themselves more highly on almost all items related to academic abilities. Students (3.81) considered that they completed assignments on time to a greater degree than did their teachers (3.00). Teachers (2.97) were less likely to agree with the statement that ‘the student can solve problems’, while students (4.25) and parents (3.75) rated student problem solving ability much higher.

Most students indicated they wanted to display more positive behaviors and do better in classes. When asked for something they would like to do with their mentor that they do not currently do, two students in the lower achievement range stated that help with homework would be beneficial. When asked for one thing they would like to change about themselves while participating in TeamMates, three students responded. Two students mentioned improving their reading skills and another wanted help in becoming more focused and less distracted. Most of the students suggested that their mentors should give them more advice on doing better in

school. One male student said, “I can get mad at myself if I don’t do good. I need to be reminded to calm down.”

Students provided various ways in which their mentor helped them be more successful at school, ranging from talking about college or becoming more independent. A male student stated, “I’m doing bad on reading, so we read once a week and talk about what happened.” And indeed, most students reported that their grades had gone up since joining the TeamMates Mentoring Program. A female student said, “It’s helped me in writing and my grade has gone up.” Still, there is clearly room to improve, and some students stated they still had difficulty with school work. Another female student said, “Quizzes and tests are hard for me. I have to be more independent, but a lot of independent reading tests are hard. Memory problems.”

### Planning for the Future

Teachers (4.23), parents (4.75), and students (4.56) agreed that the student planned to graduate from high school. While parents (4.47) and students (4.53) agreed that the student planned to attend college, teachers seemed unaware of students’ future plans. Teachers either disagreed or were neutral toward the statement that the student sets goals for his or her future (2.77), even although students (3.62) and parents (3.81) mostly agreed with this statement. Teachers also gave a low response to “The student knows how important planning is” (2.80), but students felt that they did know how important planning was (4.12).

During the interviews, only two students stated that they talked about the future with their mentor. One female student stated, “We talk about what college I want to go to. We have a good relationship; it is natural to talk to her.” However, three students specifically stated that they hadn’t talked about their future with their mentor. It is possible that for some students, limiting discussion about future plans is helpful in keeping the stresses of daily life manageable. A male student explained, “I like to have someone to talk to about school and play games with. We talk about family. No future discussions, just the future in one week.”

However, almost all students indicated they wanted to continue on to college after graduating from high school, and most of the students had an idea of what they wanted to study in college. A female student shared, “I want to be a vet because I like animals and I want to take care of them.” A male student planned to “go to college for agriculture and do farming.” When asked what TeamMates could do to help them accomplish their goals, most of the students wanted to be encouraged, but also wanted to talk more about their future goals. A male student suggested, “TeamMates can talk about the job, any advice, and good choices to go see people do these jobs.” They wanted to be able to get more information

and advice on how they could attain their goals. One student said, "Help me think of jobs that could be available. Try to understand what they do."

### Discussion

Students in this rural Nebraska school district responded positively to the social and emotional aspects of the TeamMates program. They reported good relationships with their mentors, reiterating the importance for school-age children to have a trusted adult to talk to. Students felt that TeamMates had helped them overcome shyness. Most students felt good about themselves and had friends at school. This finding affirms research conclusions that mentoring programs lead to personal and social growth, particularly in regard to self-esteem (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). At the same time, students, teachers, and parents all agreed that the students in TeamMates avoid risky behavior and enjoy being in TeamMates. Parents expressed that they were glad that their child was in the program.

The local TeamMates program should also be credited for helping most of its mentees improve their grades, as well as for emphasizing the importance of academic achievement and for boosting students' confidence in specific academic skills, such as problem-solving. This finding also concurs with prior research conclusions that mentoring can improve academic skills (Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch, 2000). However, the program needs to pay specific attention to lower-achieving students and perhaps innovate new ways to help them attain academic success. The dissatisfaction with TeamMates some lower-achieving students expressed should serve as a warning sign that other strategies may be needed to reach this group.

It is interesting to note that when compared to parents and students, teachers gave lower responses to almost all the items surveyed. This may be an indicator that students and their parents have lower standards of academic performance, or that the improvements taking place are perceived to be more significant by students and their parents. It is also possible that teachers simply do not know the students as well as the parents and students themselves do, and are therefore less able to gauge improvement based on a mentoring program.

The ultimate goal of TeamMates is to encourage students to complete high school and attend post-secondary education. According to research, mentoring programs can indeed foster higher expectations for

achievement and lead to a greater likelihood that the mentee will graduate high school and attend college (Mentoring Institute, 2010; Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008). This study indicates that the TeamMates Mentoring Program has successfully encouraged its mentees to adopt these goals for themselves. Almost every student wanted to continue on to college after graduating high school.

These positive results are especially important given the research indicating that rural communities may face more challenges providing academic and emotional support for their students than non-rural communities (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Mihalyuk & Seifer, 2007). The TeamMates Mentoring Program has had to compensate for a lack of financial and human resources available to the community. On the other hand, TeamMates might have drawn on advantages of rural communities, such as a strong sense of community and an emphasis on relationships and family (Mihalyuk & Seifer, 2007; Nachtigal, 1982).

Many students wanted their mentors to provide advice on improving academic habits and more help with homework. Students wanted their mentors to help them accomplish their long-term goals by talking more about these goals and providing more information. Yet only two students reported talking about their future with their mentor. One outcome of this study is that the TeamMates Mentorship Program began implementing visitations to different colleges of various sizes and emphasizing earlier conversations about goal-setting. In this way, TeamMates hopes to enable students to make better connections between their long-term goals and their present behaviors, and thus help students achieve their long-term goals.

### Conclusion

The social and emotional support provided by the TeamMates Mentorship Program should be lauded. TeamMates' emphasis on academic achievement in a rural community is also noteworthy. However, students in this community have indicated a desire for extra academic support and long-term planning. The TeamMates program has begun to address this issue, and should continue to make efforts to assist with long-term planning. Specialized assistance targeted to students who are low-achievers may also be necessary. The TeamMates Mentorship Program has laid the groundwork for student success in a rural community: It now needs to foster the achievement of student goals.



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