ABSTRACT
        Efforts of one school system in Alabama to respond to
students' self-reports of participation in at-risk behaviors are examined.
The Seniors Offering Support (SOS) program was designed to deal with these
problems. The program aimed towards fostering student resiliency in an
attempt to create healthy decision making. The program attempted to
positively affect: (1) transition and mobility issues; (2) academic failure;
(3) family management problems; (4) anti-social behavior; and (5) low
neighborhood attachment and community disorganization. Seniors were matched
with families to provide support; serve as role models; offer advice; and be
an active listener. The other component of the program, Seniors as Tutors,
offered students grades K through 11 with assistance completing class
assignments during school hours at least once per week. Data collected on
program participants showed favorable results. It concludes that
intergenerational programs in the future should include careful documentation
of efforts to recruit and retain students, families, and volunteers; evaluate
training materials; administer assessment tools consistently; and report
impacts. (Contains 15 references.) (JDM)

Evaluation of the Seniors Offering Support Program of Hoover City Schools

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Introduction

The 1999 Alabama Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicated that many of Alabama's school youth are practicing at-risk behaviors. Following are just a few examples:

- 34.7% of students indicated they had ridden in a car or other vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol on at least one occasion during the previous 30 days.

- 29% indicated that they had 5 or more drinks of alcohol in a row, that is, within a couple of hours, on at least one of the previous 30 days.

- 41.7% said that they had used marijuana at least once during their life, with 23% saying they used it ten or more times during their life.

The list goes on. Students reported risky behaviors related to tobacco use, lack of exercise, as well as inadequate nutrition (Alabama State Department of Education, 2000).

Students' self-reported health risks are disturbing. However, there is a growing body of literature which provide guidance for positive approaches to dealing with the issues, thereby decreasing the likelihood that students will take up some of these risky behaviors (Calvert, 1997; Doll & Lyon, 1998; Forman & Kalafat, 1998; Grotbert, 1997; Hunter & Chandler, 1999; Maddi, Wadhwa & Haier, 1996; Masten, 1998; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Stephenson, Henry & Robinson, 1996). This research includes examination of the concepts of resiliency, protective factors, and hardiness. While these concepts are different, several factors emerge as common threads throughout this literature. Positive factors that tend to decrease the uptake of risky behaviors include:

- a close, affectionate relationship with at least one adult (parent or caregiver);

- effective parenting (characterized by warmth, structure, and high expectations);

- access to warm relationships and guidance from other extended family members;

- relationships with positive adult models in a variety of extra-familial contexts, including school;

- connections to one or more pro-social organizations;

- family structure with rituals and rules; and

- involvement of parents and other community members with schools.

Researchers posit that the aforementioned factors promote youth with:

- high self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem;

- resilient belief system, i.e., personal perception that adversity can be overcome;

- higher rate of healthy and productive activities; and

- a positive social orientation.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the efforts of one school system in Alabama that established an intergenerational program, Seniors Offering Support (SOS), designed to support parents and students by fostering student resiliency leading to healthy decision making. This paper will specifically discuss implementation procedures and process evaluation of the SOS program.

Background

The Search Institute of Minneapolis submitted a report entitled, "Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth" to the Hoover City School System in 1998. Developmental Assets contains a summary of a set of 40 assets, which may affect risk-taking and resiliency. Assets were divided into two categories: external and internal. Highlights from the report that relate to the SOS program include:

External assets

- 52% reported they received support from three or more non-parent adults

- 46% reported experiencing caring neighbors

- 31% perceived that adults in the community value youth

Internal assets

- 60% believed it to be important NOT to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs

- 54% reported having high self-esteem

- 49% said they could resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations

While these numbers are encouraging, they still indicate that 40-50% of youth said they do not
have the assets described. One possible strategy to address the concerns is the implementation of
an intergenerational program, matching caring adult volunteers to public school students.

Benefits of intergenerational programs

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) described the
need for "voluntary efforts of individuals, business, parent, and civic groups to cooperate in
strengthening educational programs." Wessley (1995) described the mutual benefits to schools
and seniors from volunteering. These benefits include "enhanced student self-esteem, increased
intergenerational understanding, and expanded curriculum and supply of expertise, and added
voting and advocacy support for the school district's agenda." There are opportunities to reach
out to recruit seniors as volunteers in our nation's schools since fewer than 5% are currently
school volunteers.

Five steps to start a senior volunteer program in schools have been identified from a
review of the professional literature (Carney, Dobson & Dobson, 1998; Dallman & Power, 1997;
Strom & Strom, 1995). These steps include:

1. define the needs,

2. recruit and train volunteers,

3. recognize volunteer contributions,

4. look for outside funding sources, and

5. perform ongoing program evaluation.

Six models of intergenerational programs also emerged. The five which are most relevant to the Hoover SOS program include the following components:

- tutor/mentor - seniors work one-on-one to help students increase academic skills,

- bi-directional tutor - both seniors and students share specialized skills, e.g., reading literacy and computer literacy,

- skills building - seniors assist students to learn behavioral and social skills for healthful relationships,

- early intervention - seniors provide warmth, guidance, and support to prepare preschool students for entrance into elementary grades, and

- exceptional children - senior volunteers assist children with developmental disabilities.

The Hoover City Schools SOS Program

Goal

The Hoover City Schools SOS program was designed and implemented with one primary goal: to provide an environment of caring, support, and bonding to the community for all participants. Schoolteachers were also involved in the tutoring component of SOS. The SOS program activities were aimed at positively affecting: 1) transition and mobility issues, 2) academic failure, 3) family management problems, 4) anti-social behavior, and 5) low neighborhood attachment and community disorganization. There were two components to the SOS program: family support matches and seniors as academic tutors. The aim of each component was different.

<u>Staff</u>

Two individuals were primarily responsible for developing, planning, implementing, and evaluating the SOS program. The program coordinator, who was a trained counselor and social worker, did the majority of implementation. Her supervisor was the Safe and Drug Free Schools Specialist. The Hoover City School System superintendent provided oversight for the entire project. Additionally, there was an Advisory Committee which met twice each year to discuss program processes and accomplishments. Committee members included Hoover City School System central office administrators, principals, guidance counselors, clergy, and senior volunteers. Faculty members from the Health Education Program at The University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Education were invited to assist with program planning and evaluation during years two and four.

<u>Methods</u>

<u>Recruitment and support building.</u> Senior volunteers were recruited by a variety of methods. SOS staff made presentations at senior citizens groups, churches, garden clubs, and service organizations. Stories about the SOS program were printed in church bulletins, club newsletters, and local newspapers.

Principals, teachers, and guidance counselors identified students and families who might benefit from the program. Of particular interest to the SOS program staff were students of single-parent families and recent arrivals to Hoover who had no relatives in the area. The availability of SOS Program volunteers was highlighted in monthly school newsletters sent home to all parents and discussed during parent meetings held at school. Some families then self-selected to participate in the program.

Senior volunteers and parent training. Senior volunteers were required to attend a minimum of 1/2 - day of training; several completed two days of training. This training was conducted by an external consultant and the SOS program staff. Seniors learned to listen to student and parent concerns and provide friendly advice. Students assisted with the practice of communication skills. Parents also attended a 1/2 day training session prior to being matched with a senior volunteer. The purpose of the training sessions was to help seniors and families realize what these new relationships could be and what they were not meant to be (boundaries and expectations).

Senior and family matches. Forty-four family matches were made during the program years of 1996-2000. Eighty-nine percent of the families were white. Eight were Middle Eastern and three were Asian. Several families participated more than one year.

The matching process was slightly revised and improved each year. After submitting a written application, senior volunteers, parents, and school personnel were interviewed by the program coordinator. Senior volunteers were matched to students and families based on similar interests, expectations, time availability, access to transportation, academic interests, and physical limitations.

Once matched, the seniors maintained ongoing relationships with the families and students. The type of relationship was that of displaying love and caring, being an active listener, sharing wisdom, providing support, responding to needs (such as grief), sharing joy and sorrow, modeling positive behaviors, and offering advice. Senior volunteers were not babysitters; they did not handle discipline problems in place of a parent, guardian, or teacher.

Together, seniors and parents participated in four supervised social activities per year. These included parties, games, and picnics sponsored by the Hoover City Mayor's Office and Hoover Parks and Recreation Board.

Senior tutors. Senior tutors assisted children in grades K-11 to complete class assignments during school hours at least once per week. Teachers identified students who could benefit from tutoring. A senior volunteer tutor was then assigned to students who, along with their parents, agreed to participate. The tutoring aspect of SOS was begun during the 1997-98 school year. Fifty students received academic tutoring from 1998-2000. Most were in the elementary grades.

Program process evaluation

The program evaluation for the SOS Program focused on process. Program staff desired to improve volunteer recruitment, training, matching, and support. Volunteers, parents, students, and teachers completed surveys and interviews. Parallel forms were used to collect data from program participants. Both forced-choice and open-ended items were included in surveys.

Seniors rated: 1) the initial volunteer training workshop, 2) the SOS Program Senior Volunteer Training Manual, 3) effectiveness of senior-family matches, and 4) support received from SOS program staff.

Results

Demographic data. Table 1 reveals statistics on senior volunteers from 1996-2000. Six of the 13 senior program volunteers from 1996-97 returned for the 1997-98 school year. Nineteen of the 22 volunteers from 1999-00 returned from the previous year. The majority of senior volunteers served as academic tutors to elementary and middle grade students.

Table 1.

Number, Race, Gender and Marital Status of Senior Volunteers by Program Year

Program year	Number, race, gender	Marital status
1996-98	5 White males,	11 married,
	17 White females	5 widowed,
		2 divorced, 2 single,
		2 unknown
1998-99	4 White males,	13 married,
	1 Asian male,	9 widowed,
	22 White females	4 divorced, 1 single
1999-00	4 White males,	9 married, 8 widowed
	18 White females	4 divorced, 1 single

Perspectives of senior volunteers-family matches. Over the course of the four years, volunteers were asked to identify strengths and weaknesses of the family matching component of the SOS program. Strengths identified were:

- good opportunity to give to families in need of assistance, as well as the community in general,

- the socials,

- planned opportunities for group discussions,

- the trainer, and

- specific skills content of the training manual.

Weaknesses identified by volunteers of the family match component included:

- over abundance of material in training manual,

- inadequate time to absorb training manual material,

- time constraints of the family,

- family not responsive,

- inadequate matching process, and

- inadequate staff support.

Perspectives of senior volunteers - tutor matches. During the 1998-1999 school year, 12 of 27 senior volunteers returned a completed survey. Two thirds felt "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their overall experiences as a SOS program volunteer and the process used to match them to students for tutoring.

Seniors were also asked to rate the adequacy of training and support for tutoring and family assistance. Five (45%) felt "very prepared" while two felt "prepared." Seven of 11 felt that SOS Program staff provided "adequate help"; three felt that "a great deal of help" had been

received. Senior volunteer tutors also rated the initial training workshop. Fourteen (61%) felt the workshop was "excellent"; one-third stated it was "very good."

When asked how the senior-student match could be improved, seniors most often (8/12) replied that more information about the specific academic and other needs of the students would be helpful. Seven also indicated that they needed more information on the expectations of teachers, students, and families. Suggestions for improvements included: more time with students; some students needed counselors rather than tutors; better communication between tutors and teachers needed to avoid schedule conflicts; needed to learn more methods of academic tutoring; and better coordination needed when more than one tutor is assigned the same student.

Family perceptions. Responses from parents in 1998-1999 included both positive and negative perceptions about the program in general. Parent's positive responses to their experiences included comments such as:

- my senior volunteer "has enriched my life",

- the purpose of the program was good,

- some said they had only minimal contact with senior volunteers, which was insufficient,

- felt satisfied with how their expectations were met,

- some felt "very connected",

- felt "recognized and valued", and

- caused them to spend more time with their children.

Parents also recommended improvement:

- refine matching process

- encourage more contact with seniors

- involve seniors and families in the planning of the social events

Families were also asked, in 1998, to rate the SOS Program Parent Training Manual prepared by an external consultant for the school system. Strengths identified were: 1) it describes ideas to strengthen families; 2) it outlines traits of healthy families; 3) the manual includes multiple self-assessments of family assets and needs; and 4) the content includes general life skills information, which is useful.

Suggestions to improve this manual included: 1) limit the number of concepts and activities in favor of more in-depth coverage of a few key areas; 2) need specific information regarding Hoover area problem/crisis centers; and 3) add information on cultural diversity.

Teacher and school administrator perspectives. Five teachers or administrators provided their perceptions regarding the SOS Program. Three felt "very satisfied and two felt "satisfied" with the overall tutoring component of the program, including the matching process. All said that academic performance improved as a result of the tutoring. It was also felt those student attitudes toward school improved. It was recommended that "allowing students to meet senior volunteers before the beginning of the tutoring program" would improve the process. It was also felt that students needed to somehow feel a part of the larger SOS program, rather than just an individual tutee.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

Suggestions of program participants

Although the SOS Program, overall, appeared to have a positive effect, improvements could be made. Senior volunteers offered three practical suggestions:

1. offer regular training for families who participate;

2. involve school counselors who can assist with all aspects of program implementation and evaluation; and

3. provide more background information about the families to be matched with (i.e. birthdays, place of employment, church affiliation, emergency contacts).

Parent suggestions

1. increase opportunities to interact with senior volunteers before matches are made;

2. increase the number of shared outings with seniors; and

3. provide a safe and accessible place to meet in the community.

Additional suggestions for program improvement can be seen in the professional literature. Six recommendations from Strom and Strom (1995) are particularly relevant to the SOS program.

1. "Teachers should identify specific tasks that grandparents can do."

2. "Grandparents should identify their interests."

3. "Volunteers should be screened and oriented."

4. "Volunteers need someone to represent them."

5. "Volunteers require in-service training."

6. "Planned, ongoing evaluation."

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is evident that SOS Program staff strived to build a program that was meaningful to all participants. The participant comments show that overall, the impression was favorable. In the future, program planners within Hoover City Schools should give close attention to detail. Important information was missing, e.g., How many students and families chose to participate out of all of those who were contacted? What factors led to the decision to expand program

activities to offer academic tutoring in 1998? How did this affect family matches? Why did some schools decline to join the academic tutoring program? Why did students, families, and seniors leave the program? Intergenerational programs should include careful documentation of efforts to recruit and retain students, families, and volunteers, evaluate training materials, administer assessment tools consistently, and report impacts.

While there was certainly room for improvement, the SOS Program took great strides to provide quality activities and services to all those involved. In many respects, that was accomplished and program staff should be commended for their efforts.

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