DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 787 EC 308 851

AUTHOR	Welkowitz, Julie; Fox, Wayne L.
TITLE	A Model Mentor/Advisor Program Supporting Secondary School Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Challenges and Their Families within Rural Vermont. October 1, 1996-September 30, 2000. Final Report.
INSTITUTION	Vermont Univ., Burlington. Center on Disability and Community Inclusion.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	52p.; Part of the Program for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbance.
CONTRACT	H237H960024
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Behavior Disorders; *Conflict Resolution; *Emotional Disturbances; High Risk Students; High Schools; Interpersonal Competence; *Mentors; Modeling (Psychology); Prevention; Program Design; Program Effectiveness; *Self Concept; Self Esteem; *Service Learning

ABSTRACT

This final report discusses the activities and outcomes of the Mentor/Advisor Project, a program designed to promote positive self-concept and school success for high school students at risk of or experiencing emotional and behavioral disabilities in rural Vermont. The Project involved small groups of heterogeneous students (i.e., those with and without behavior problems) facilitated by an adult mentor, who engaged in community service learning activities and individualized projects that built upon their strengths and interests. Through these applied activities, students learned skills in the areas of collaboration, problem solving, conflict resolution, and self-appraisal. The mentor/advisors were volunteers from the school staff and received on-going support and consultation. Evaluation of the model was conducted in one school over a 4-year period. The evaluation process consisted of quantitative and qualitative components. Students (n=102), parents, and teachers involved with the Mentor/Advisor Project were all included in the evaluation process, in addition to a matched control group. Students indicated that participation in the mentor groups had a positive effect on their relationships and increased their self-esteem, and parents noted their children gained skills as a result of their participation, particularly in the area of conflict resolution. (CR)

A Model Mentor/Advisor Program Supporting Secondary School Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Challenges and Their Families within Rural Vermont

October 1, 1996-September 30, 2000

Final Report

Julie Welkowitz

Wayne L. Fox

84.237H H237H60024

PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH
WITH SERIOUS EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

A Model Mentor/Advisor Program Supporting Secondary School Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Challenges and their Families within Rural Vermont

FINAL REPORT

October 1, 1996 – September 30, 2000

Center on Disability and Community Inclusion

University of Vermont
101 Cherry Street, Ste 450
Burlington, VT 05401-4439

THE UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN
DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND SERVICE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. ABSTRACT

The Mentor/Advisor Project was designed to promote positive self-concept and school success for high school students at risk of or experiencing emotional and behavioral disabilities. The project involves small groups of heterogeneous students (i.e., those with and without behavior problems) facilitated by an adult mentor, who engage in community service learning activities and individualized projects that build upon their strengths and interests. Through these applied activities, students learn skills in the areas of collaboration, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and self-appraisal. The mentor/advisors are volunteers from the school staff and receive on-going support and consultation.

Evaluation of the model was conducted in one school over a four year period. The evaluation process consisted of quantitative and qualitative components. Students, parents and teachers involved with the Mentor/Advisor program were all included in the evaluation process, in addition to a matched control group. Outcomes targeted for study included: skill acquisition, school performance (i.e., attendance, grades, disciplinary referrals), emotional and behavioral assets, coping styles, perceived school climate, and program satisfaction. This report will provide an overview of the project design, review the results according to the objectives, and discuss implications.

II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

A. Philosophical Foundation

The model for the Mentor/Advisor Program was based on the work of Brendtro, Brokenleg & VanBrockern;1990, with respect to the Circle of Courage model derived from the philosophy of the Lahota Indians which emphasizes the values of: Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity. Regarding "Belonging" or the need to be accepted by others and feel part of a bigger whole, the Mentor/Advisor Project created opportunities for both peer and adult mentor relationships.

In terms of Mastery, Brendtro et al. refer to the need of youth to have a sense of accomplishment in areas that are important and of interest to them. The Mentor/Advisor Project sought to address this objective by providing youth the opportunity to explore areas of individual interest and be supported in these goals by their mentor and others in the community. Students were also given the opportunity to learn important life skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, in an applied and meaningful fashion.

Independence refers to the need for youth to have some sense of control over their actions, their learning, and the events in their environment. The mentor groups provided numerous opportunities for leadership and autonomy, given that the community service learning activities and individual projects were student-directed. That is, students were taught the skills to facilitate their own groups and to negotiate with each other. In addition, students were encouraged to participate in the

Project Steering Committee, as well as dissemination activities.

Generosity promotes positive self-worth through opportunities to give to one's community. This project supported this objective through the emphasis on community service learning activities. It also enabled students to give back to their families through numerous family dinners and other events.

B. Description of the Model

The model for the Mentor/Advisor Project, as it was originally proposed consisted of four closely related components, designed to support youth at risk of emotional and behavioral challenges. These included: 1) a **Mentor/Advisor** who meets regularly with a small heterogeneous group of students; 2) **Community service learning** projects that were developed and implemented by the students; 3) **Personal Learning Plans** developed by each student to explore an area of individual interest and maximize their strengths; and, 4) a collaborative process for **supporting the mentors.**

Students who were interested in participating were divided into mentor/groups consisting of approximately 5-8 students. While the original proposal suggested 6-12 students, it was found that more than 8 students per group posed difficulties both in terms of group cohesion and practical transportation issues. An effort was made to balance the groups with respect to: risk status (particularly behavioral issues), gender and grade level. In particular, every effort was made not to have any groups where more than one-half of the students demonstrated significant behavioral or cognitive challenges. By opening the groups to a diversity of students, it was hoped that the program would be seen as a high status project by the youth.

In addition, it was anticipated that students without behavioral challenges would model appropriate behavior for other students. Given that this was a prevention project, it was also important to create an opportunity for all students to benefit. A mentor/advisor was assigned to each group to support the students and facilitate the group process. Mentor/advisors were volunteers from among the school faculty and staff (i.e., regular educators, special educators, guidance counselors, related service personnel). Students were encouraged to stay with their mentor groups throughout high school. As seniors graduated, new students would be added to each group.

Each of these mentor groups was conducted according to a collaborative teaming model, where students shared responsibility in decision-making and planning. There was a "check-in" time at the beginning of each group meeting where students had the opportunity to share significant events in their lives and a process time at the end of each meeting where students discussed how they worked together. Through this collaborative process, students were able to practice skills in the areas of communication, problem-solving & decision-making, conflict resolution, goal-setting, and self-appraisal.

A curriculum was established as a guideline for the mentor groups. The initial series of meetings focused on relationship building and learning the collaborative teaming process. Following that, a major focus of the groups was on the development and implementation of community service learning projects. Students worked together to assess the needs in their community and select projects that would meet these needs. It was anticipated that these experiences would enable students to practice the

skills listed above in "real life" settings, as well as giving them the opportunity to establish positive relationships with community members. Another key component of the curriculum was Personal Learning Plans. Students were encouraged to explore their strengths and interests, with the assistance of their mentor/advisor, and develop a plan that enabled them to pursue their individual goals. Students were encouraged to select areas that they would not normally be able to pursue within the traditional academic high school curriculum. In addition to learning specific skills, it was anticipated that the personal learning plans would provide students with an opportunity to participate in meaningful activities that would promote personal investment in their education.

It was anticipated that mentor/advisors would need on-going support to successfully carry-out their responsibilities. To this end, the model proposed that mentors form a collaborative group where they could provide each other with peer support, as well as receive consultation from project staff and other key school personnel (i.e., administrators, guidance, special educators). The mentor team was to meet on a weekly basis throughout the school year. This collaborative support process was seen as an opportunity for mentors to discuss mentorship curriculum issues, problem-solve around behavioral issues or group dynamics, and to address other relevant systems issues (e.g., scheduling, identification of community service learning sites, involvement of families, etc.).

C. Implementation Design

1. Project Statewide Advisory Council

One of the first objectives of the project was to establish a statewide

Advisory Council consisting of students with emotional disturbance, family members, regular and special educators, administrators, representatives from state agencies (i.e., Departments of Education, Mental Health, Social and Rehabilitation Services), local youth agencies, and other relevant community members (i.e., representatives from the business community, community services learning sites, etc.). This Council was to meet on an annual basis to review project goals, monitor progress, and make recommendations as to better meet student needs.

2. Site Selection

Letters were sent to secondary schools throughout Vermont who met some of the basic criteria for participation. Project staff then met with interested schools to determine the extent to which that school met the selection criteria. Criteria for participation consisted of: participation in an introductory training institute, the existence of administrative support for the project, a significant percentage of the faculty/staff who were willing to be mentors, having a representative number of students who are identified or are at risk for emotional disturbance, and a commitment to including students who are at-risk in the regular education environment. On the basis of meeting these criteria, two schools were selected as model sites: Peoples Academy in Morrisville, Vermont, a rural community in northern Vermont and Rutland High School in Rutland, Vermont, a relatively urban center in the southern region of the state.

3. Student Recruitment

The target population for this project were students with or at-risk of Emotional Disturbance. However, efforts were made to balance the groups

so that at least half the participating students were not identified as at-risk. Student recruitment was initially conducted through presentations to students by faculty, project flyers, letters to parents, and targeted recruitment of specific students through recommendations by guidance and teachers. After the initial year, recruitment strategies also relied heavily on student efforts through student presentations to their peers or middle school students and word of mouth. The project description was also listed in the course catalogue. Participation in the project was completely voluntary. For students at Peoples Academy, course credit was received.

4. Site Steering Committee

Each model site formed a Project Steering Committee to monitor the project throughout the grant period and to determine training needs of teachers to support youth with ED. The Steering Committee was to meet monthly with the Project Coordinator. It was proposed that the Steering Committee would consist of representatives from the school board, school administration, students, family members, special education, guidance, and other faculty.

5. Implementation Phases

Initially, the project was to be implemented in four phases. Phase I was to include the necessary start-up activities to begin model implementation in one secondary school. Phase II was to include the recruitment and necessary start-up activities in a second high school. Phase III was to be continuation of the model in the first school and replication in the second school. Phase IV focused on dissemination and project activities that would support sustaining the model in the two sites after the end of grant funding.

D. Modifications in Project Design

A decision was made to implement the Mentor/Advisor model program in two secondary schools in the Spring of the first year, rather than wait until the third year of the project to begin activities in a second school. Thus, the project was initiated at both Peoples Academy and Rutland High School in the Spring of 1997. However, the model as described above was discontinued at the Rutland High School site after the second year of the project because of issues specific to that system (see Results by Objective). The other components of the project design (i.e., the advisory council, target population, steering committee) remained in effect.

E. Hypotheses

1. Student Outcomes

Compared with students in the control group and the student body as a whole, it was hypothesized that those who participated in the Mentor/Advisor program (both students at-risk and those not at risk) would demonstrate improvements in the following areas:

- 1) emotional and behavioral status
- 2) coping skills
- 3) satisfaction with school
- 4) quality of relationships
- 5) academic progress
- 6) social and other life skills

It was also hypothesized that these students would demonstrate lower scores on measures of risk factors (ie drop-out rate, suicide rate, drug and alcohol use), when compared to the rest of the student population.

2. Parent Outcomes

It was hypothesized that parents of students who participated in the Mentor/Advisor Program would demonstrate the following:

- ❖ Satisfaction with the program
- ❖ Improved communication between home and school
- ❖ Greater involvement and input into their child's education
- ❖ Improved perceptions of their child's social skills and behavioral status

3. Mentor/Advisor Outcomes

It was hypothesized that mentor/advisors would report the following:

1) Satisfaction with the Mentor/Advisor Program
2) Increased satisfaction with the school environment
3) Increased skills and knowledge in working with students with or at-risk of emotional disturbance
4) Improved collaboration with families
5) Improved perceptions of the social skills and behavioral status of students in their mentor groups

F. Participating Sites

1. People's Academy, Morrisville, Vermont

People's Academy is a middle/secondary school (grades 6 – 12) of 650 students located in Morrisville, Vermont. Children and youth from the Lamoille South Supervisory Union residing in the towns of Morrisville and Elmore, Vermont comprise the student body. The focus of this project was grades 9 through 12 with a student population of less than 400. Morrisville is a rural community of 5100 in north central Vermont. General income levels are more

than $10,000 below the state average. Approximately 33% of the high school population receive a free or reduced lunch.

2. Rutland High School, Rutland, Vermont

Rutland High School is a secondary school (grades 9 – 12) of more than 1100 students located in Rutland, Vermont. The vast majority of reside in the city of Rutland. A few students tuition into the high school from nearby rural communities that do not have their own high school.

Rutland represents the second most populated area in Vermont. Rutland City has a population of about 17,300. General income levels are slightly below the state average. Approximately 15% of the school population receive a free or reduced lunch.

G. Target Population

The target population for this project were students with or at-risk of emotional disturbance. Emotional disturbance was defined according to the Vermont Department of Education regulations for Emotional and Behavioral Disability. In addition to those who were identified through the Special Education system as meeting criteria for emotional disturbance, students were considered to be "high risk", if they met any of these additional criteria: 1) eligible for supplemental services because he or she meets the criteria for special education, ACT 504, ACT 117 (involves a referral to an Educational Support team because of difficulties at school), ACT 264 (eligible for interagency coordination of services because of a serious emotional disturbance); and/or, 2) failed two or more classes at baseline.

Overall, 103 students participated in the program at Peoples Academy over the four years of the grant period. This included 42 males and 61

females. An additional 58 students participated in the Mentor/Advisor Program at Rutland High School during the first two years of the grant. However, complete information about risk status, demographics and other school record data was only collected for students who had been in the Mentor/Advisor group for at least two semesters. Furthermore, complete data was only collected at Peoples Academy, given that Rutland High School was no longer a participating site after the first two years. This sub-sample included a total of 63 students at Peoples Academy who had participated in at least two semesters of the Mentor/Advisor Program. This included 40 females (63.5%) and 23 males (36.5%). Those students who were receiving supplemental services because they met criteria for special education, ACT 504, ACT 117, or ACT 264 composed 33.3% (N=21) of the sample. When the at-risk definition was expanded to also include those students who had failed at least two classes at baseline, the percentage increased to 43% (N=27) of the sample. The total number of students who were receiving free or reduced lunch was 59% (N=37) of the sample.

Despite efforts to establish a matched control sample, those students and parents who consented to be in the control group, tended to reflect non-risk status. There were a total of 24 students in the control group, 58% female (N=14), 42% (N=10) male. Of this group, only 12.5% (N=3) of students were receiving supplemental services through special education, ACT 504, ACT 117 or ACT 264. When the at-risk definition was expanded to include students who had failed at least 2 classes at baseline, the number in the at-risk group increased to 21% (N=5) of the sample. The number of students in the control group receiving free or reduced lunch was 12.5%

(N=3); thus reflecting a higher family income than the students in the Mentorship group.

For parents of children in the mentorship group, the mean for mother's (or female caregiver's) education was 2.48 [N=33] on a scale of 1 to 4 (1=below high school; 2= completed high school; 3= started college; 4= completed college]. Regarding father's (or male caregiver's) educational background, the mean was 2.31 [N=32]. In terms of occupation, the mean score for female caregivers was 43.04 [N=28] on a scale of 0-100. For male caregivers, the mean was 40.36 [N=28]. These scores reflect an occupational level that is comparable to very small business owners and skilled manual workers. Parents of children in the control group had on average higher educational and occupational levels. When the data for students in the Mentor/Advisor program were separated into at-risk and non at-risk groups, the parents of the students in the non-risk group had on average, higher educational and occupational levels.

III. PROJECT STATUS

The success of the project with respect to fulfilling each of its stated objectives will be discussed below. Results will reflect both descriptive analyses, as well as findings from the quantitative and qualitative evaluation.

Objective 1. To establish a project statewide Advisory Council that includes students with emotional disturbance, parents of children with emotional disturbance, representatives of state and local agencies serving students with emotional disturbance and their families, and public school educators and administrators.

The composition and nature of the Advisory Council changed over time to address the needs of the project and to reflect the emphasis on community ownership, particularly in the latter years of the grant. In year one of the project, the local site-based Steering Committees took over many of the advisory functions needed for initial implementation. Initially, each site steering committee was composed of: school administration (principal, special education coordinator), guidance, mentor representatives, students with and without emotional disturbance, the Director of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, and Mentorship Project staff (i.e., Coordinator, Parent Liaison, other UVM faculty who provided technical assistance). In addition, other relevant members attended the meetings as well (i.e., School to Work Coordinator, other interested community members, representatives from an alternative school). The steering committee met on a monthly basis at each site to oversee and provide input into the start-up and general administration of the project.

During the second year of the grant, a statewide Advisory Council was established. Membership consisted of participating representatives from the two school sites (i.e., mentors, administrators, students), parents, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, School-To-Work initiatives, other resiliency initiatives, statewide projects to support students with emotional disturbance and other disabilities, the Vermont State Department of Education, individuals with expertise in establishing community service learning programs and personal learning plans, and project staff (i.e., faculty from the University of Vermont, the Director of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, and the parent liaisons). This meeting was

held in Burlington on February 2, 1998. The focus of the meeting was to provide a general overview of project activities and to discuss specific areas of concern (i.e., curriculum emphasis, community involvement, family involvement, personal learning plans). As a result of the meeting, additional strategies for family and community involvement were implemented, connections were made with similar statewide initiatives and it led to increased requests for dissemination materials and presentations.

For the third and fourth years of the project, a decision was made to hold the Advisory Council meetings locally in the Morrisville community, the location of the primary school site. This decision was made for two main reasons. First, it was hoped that by hosting the Advisory Council locally, it would increase attendance by parents and other local community members (such as potential community service sites, businesses, human service agencies), thus facilitating community ownership. Second, the selection of Morrisville as the site of the meeting also reflected a shift in emphasis during the 3rd year, with primary support being given to the Morrisville site because of their greater adherence to the model as stipulated in the grant (see Objective 4). These annual local Advisory Council meetings were well attended by parents, students, other local community members (i.e., representatives of local agencies and businesses), mentors, school staff and administrators. In addition, there was attendance by representatives of statewide agencies and organizations (i.e., Vermont Department of Education, Chamber of Commerce) and project staff (i.e., Director of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, University of Vermont faculty, parent liaisons). Each meeting began with an overview of project

activities provided by the students. Following that, the participants were divided into small groups for discussion and participatory activities. During the 3rd year of the project, discussion was focused on the issue of community involvement. This led to: 1) strengthened connections with family and community members 2) a better sense of the community's needs, 3) increased coordination with existing community organizations, and 4) new avenues for dissemination. The last Advisory Council meeting held in February of 2000, showcased the experiences and projects of students. In addition, parents and community members spoke to their involvement over the years with project activities. The participatory activity that followed involved the development of school/community murals to reflect the core concepts of this project: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.

At each Advisory Council meeting, students took a leadership role in all aspects of the meeting. That is, students assisted in the planning of the agenda, the presentation of project accomplishments and experiences, and facilitation of small group discussion and activities. In this way, the students were able to both practice and demonstrate the skills that they had learned in their mentor groups, with respect to collaborative teaming.

During the last Advisory Council meeting, a survey was distributed to participants asking how much they already knew of the project, what they liked most about the meeting, the importance/value of the project, a listing of community needs, other suggestions. Over 90% of respondents indicated that they considered the value of the project to be "very high"; with 9% indicating that the project was "somewhat useful".

Objective 2: To demonstrate the effectiveness within one rural secondary school of a Mentor/Advisor model for improving outcomes for students with and at-risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. The model consists of the following four major components:

a) Mentor/advisors supporting teams of heterogeneous students

"I learned I have more friends than I thought I did. If I ever need anyone to talk to, they're there for me." - *Student*

"...unlike other classes you're supposed to be nice to other people..." - *Student*

Peoples Academy:

At Peoples Academy High School, Mentorship was offered as an elective class. Students who registered were divided into mentor groups of approximately 5-8 students in each group. Concerted efforts were made to have balanced groups with respect to: risk status (particularly behavioral issues), gender, and diversity of ages. In particular, every effort was made not to have any groups where more than half the students demonstrated behavioral challenges. However, because of scheduling issues, it was not always possible to have equally balanced groups. Occasionally, a group would have an over-representation of students with behavioral challenges or an imbalance in gender or age. It is our observation that female dominated groups tended to experience different group dynamics in communication and problem-solving styles vs. male dominated or equally balanced gender groups. Specifically, female dominated groups tend to prefer spending more time on processing of issues than the male dominated groups which preferred spending more time out in the field doing community service

activities. Mentors reported that varying levels of individual support were necessary for some students to complete tasks and to maintain equitable participation. For example, students with behavioral challenges sometimes required additional assistance including individual meetings between the mentor group meetings to discuss behavioral issues and needs.

The heterogeneity of the groups enabled students to become friends with peers whom they would not typically associate. As one student articulated, *"I've talked to a lot of people that I would never, ever talk to, like I could never imagine myself talking to them."* This was particularly important for students lacking in interpersonal skills, who have limited opportunities to make friends in their other classes. The small group setting, combined with the focus on team work and communication, provided a supportive environment for shy students to reach out to others. As one student stated. *"Well, I've learned to be more social and that it's okay to speak my mind. I guess I've just gotten more used to being around people and working as a team and a leader."* For some students, the mentorship class represented their only perceived link to other caring peers and adults. When one youth was asked what her life would be like without Mentorship class, she responded, *"I would be alone. I mean, I would have a life but it wouldn't really be complete without the class."*

Drop-out from the program has been related to a number of different factors including: scheduling conflict with another class (i.e., driver's education, required biology lab), leaving the high school (i.e., going to a vocational program, moving out of district, graduating, dropping out of school), or lack of interest. For students who dropped out temporarily

because of a conflict with another class, a number returned to their mentor groups the following semester or year.

Each year there were 6-7 mentors at Peoples Academy, with 4-6 concurrent groups. In addition, depending on individual student needs, several groups had paraprofessionals who participated in the activities and assisted specific students. Mentors were given the choice of facilitating a group independently or with another mentor. The mentors reflected a range of school staff positions including: regular educators, guidance and mental health staff, special educators, speech and language professional, community based learning coordinator. Despite the initial intent to have mentors stay with the program throughout its four year duration, there was significant turn-over related to a variety of factors including: staff leaving the school, changing roles/responsibilities of school staff, decision to teach a different elective, not feeling like there was sufficient time to be a mentor and perform other job responsibilities. The original grant proposal had particularly targeted regular educators to be mentors. During the first year of the project, 4 out of the 7 mentors were regular education teachers (one had a split position as a regular education and special educator). However, the role of mentor turned out to be particularly difficult for regular educators because of the lack of flexibility in their schedule and the limited preparation time that they have. Thus, by the last year of the project, only 1 out of 7 mentors was a regular educator.

Students' relationships with their mentors varied, in part related to the length of time that they were with the same mentor, and in part related to the style with which the mentor ran the group. In general, the small size

of the classes enabled mentors to get to know each of the students within their group in a way that is not always possible with large traditional classes or for school staff who do not spend extensive time one on one with students. When asked about her role as a mentor, one teacher described it as the *"favorite part of my job. I think those are some of the relationships that have developed the most here. I really have relished my time in mentoring, rather than being somewhat chained to a computer and a desk. I tend to enjoy the relationship part of it a lot more."* Several students described their mentor as a "friend" whom they would go to for support or advocacy. As one student related their experience with their mentor:

> *Once I got into a lot of trouble, he went home with me and told my mother and father and told them exactly what happened and that I was a good kid, I just made a mistake. Instead of the school calling, he drove all the way to [home], drove back, it was pretty neat. He got me out of a lot of trouble. I think he's really cool."*

"Mentorship" was offered as an elective class 2-3 times/week during an existing 50 minute "Interest Block" time, when all students have the opportunity to take an elective course. Other electives offered during this time include subjects such as photography, bee-keeping, chess, drivers education, etc. Students who need a science lab, must take it during this time period. All students in the Mentorship groups at Peoples Academy received high school credit for their participation.

During the second year of the program, the school schedule was changed so that all Mentorship classes could occur in the same time slot

(although on alternate days). Because the class occurred immediately prior to lunch, it enabled groups to bring their lunches with them and extend their time for community service learning activities. However, the issue of sufficient time was a significant one for many students and mentors. At their steering committee meetings, students often brought up the request to have Mentorship offered as a long block class. In fact, in the last year of the grant, one of the Mentorship students designed a new long-block class as part of an independent study that incorporated the key components of the Mentorship program (i.e., mentoring, community service learning). This course was approved by the administration and is being offered this year at Peoples Academy, co-taught by the student and a teacher.

The majority of students reported that they enjoyed running their own class and most quickly mastered the responsibilities of each role used in the collaborative process. In fact, for many students, having the opportunity to "take control" over their learning was one of the most significant aspects of the project. As one youth described her experience, *"We run it, basically the kids do...I like it better than any of my classes. I always look forward to that class."* To enhance their sense of ownership, as well as group identity, each class came up with their own name for their particular mentor group. In addition, students ran a contest to name the project as a whole. This process led to a re-naming of the program at Peoples Academy from Mentorship to *"STOMP: Students Together Organizing Mentoring Projects"*.

Many students also felt that the practice in learning facilitation skills and collaborative teamwork taught them valuable leadership skills. As one student stated, *"I have more authority now. I speak up more because of that*

class. Now I'm more confident in what I'm going to do." When another student was asked about the impact of the program on her leadership abilities, she replied, *Leadership"? I think it's more communication. Like for a leader to be a good leader, they have to be able to communicate their ideas well and like understand others' ideas too. And it's helped me a lot with that."* Many students also indicated that the process of understanding the perspective of others helped them to work through conflicts within their groups. As one student described, *"We have had major conflicts, but what we do is we talk it out. It's not good to, you know, not say what a conflict is because then you get, like, a grudge on people and, you know, you don't want to help out the group as a whole. So, we definitely talk about it and we confront the issue as soon as possible and then we work with it with each other and you know everybody has to make compromises."*

Rutland High School:

At the start of the project, there were 6 mentor groups, with 7 students in each group (approximately 2-3 students in each group were identified as experiencing or at risk of an emotional and behavioral disability). During the first year of the project, the mentors consisted of four regular educators, one special educator, and one school-to-work coordinator. In the second year, two mentors (both regular educators) dropped from the program because of competing work and personal demands. However, two additional mentors signed on (the registrar and the home economics teacher).

At Rutland High School, the Mentor/Advisor program was run as an extra-curricular activity during their "Activities Block at the end of the day

for 90 minutes on alternate days. Students who enrolled in the Mentorship program at Rutland High School did not receive high school credit for their participation. In addition, because the program was run as an extra-curricular activity, as opposed to a class, regular attendance of all advisees was difficult for many of the students. Therefore, in October 1998, all but one of the groups switched to an individual check-in model, as opposed to group mentoring. Thus, mentors made efforts to "check-in" with each of their advisees on at least a weekly basis. In addition, they held monthly events for all of the participating students to attend in order to maintain a sense of group cohesion and for fulfilling the community service component of the model. One mentor group continued to meet two times per week throughout the year, in the format outlined in the original model and continued to engage in ongoing community service learning and personal development projects. However, because of the change in model, Rutland High School was dropped as a site after the second year.

b) Development and implementation of Personal Learning Plans for each student:

> *"I definitely get a lot out of the program. It helps me see my goals. It helps me understand what goes on in the real world."*
>
> *- Student*

Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) offered students the opportunity to explore an area of interest that might not be available through the traditional academic curriculum. Students were encouraged by their mentors to generate their strengths and areas of interest. In some groups, this was done through the creation of a 'group resume" where all the strengths of

the members were listed. In other groups, the process was more individualized. Based on these strengths and interests, students were assisted by their mentors and their peers in the process of generating long or short-term goals and a plan for accomplishing them. Some of the individual projects that were selected included: teaching Spanish to elementary school students, learning sign language, doing Yoga, exploring specific career areas (e.g., cartoon animation, forensic pathology, physical therapy, law), finding a summer job. During the first two years of the project, students gave mixed feedback regarding the Personal Learning Plan component of the program. While most enjoyed working as a team on community projects, many expressed less interest in individually designed goal projects. Some students indicated that their aversion to the PLPs was because it seemed too much like "traditional" schoolwork. Mentors were finding it difficult to deal with students' lack of interest or active resistance to the PLP process. For this reason, during the third year of the project, the PLP component was made an optional, although highly recommended, activity. Project staff also worked with mentors on alternative ways to engage in the planning process so that it had greater appeal. Mentors who reported more success with PLPs often embedded the pursuit of individual goals within the provision of community service. For example, a number of students continued to volunteer individually at a site where their mentor group might have conducted a short-term project (i.e., working at a nursing home, assisting at an animal shelter). In addition, students expressed more interest when the personal learning plan was connected to summer job opportunities and future career development.

In the last year of the project, a volunteer from the community was recruited to assist with the program. Many of the mentors felt overloaded by trying to help students set up their PLP activities, in addition to the community service learning projects. Thus, this individual was given the responsibility of coordinating the PLPs. This involved meeting with all interested students on an individual basis and helping them to generate their interests and goals. She then found community members who had similar interests/skills and matched them with the students. Then, she met again with each student to develop a plan for accomplishing his or her goal. Having someone who was responsible for the coordination of the PLPs helped tremendously to reduce the burden on mentors and increase the interest and participation among students. While it was still voluntary, 24 out of 36 students participated in the PLP process during the last year of the grant. The process was also considerably formalized. That is, a contract was developed which was signed by the student, the parent, and the community mentor regarding the action plan to be engaged in by the student. In addition, at the end of the experience, both the student and the community mentor completed an evaluation of their experience. Those students who participated in this re-vamping of the individual projects anecdotally reported greater satisfaction with their experience, particularly as it related to their opportunity to connect with a mentor from the community. This sentiment was expressed by one student's comments, *"...having the PIP [Personal Interest Project] is really interesting because you're one on one with somebody, you know, getting to learn hands-on as to what you're into. I know that somebody was into restaurants and ...me with computers, it just*

helps out with your goals and what you want out of life."

Personal development of students was also encouraged through a variety of other avenues as well. Student participation on the project steering committee was highly encouraged. Students were also highly involved in a variety of different dissemination efforts including: presentations at statewide and national conferences, contributions to the project newsletter and local newspapers, doing radio spots regarding their activities at a local radio station, participation in/facilitation of a variety of community forums and functions. Those students who participated in these activities indicated that it improved their communication skills, increased sense of confidence, and helped them to feel that what they had to say was important.. As one student remarked, *"Conference presentations? Wow, they opened a door of opportunity, it's just unreal how...I got to say how I felt...I like them a lot."*

c) Completing team designed community service learning projects within the school and greater community.

"If you go to a homeless shelter or to an elderly home, you actually see what it's like in the real world." - *Student*

"I liked working on community projects, helping others, feeling that even though we're teenagers, we care." - *Student*

The community service learning projects were among the most successful aspects of the project. Students reportedly enjoyed being out in the community (and out of the school building!) and engaging in projects to help others. This process was facilitated by the hiring of a Community Based Learning Coordinator at Peoples Academy who made extensive efforts to

connect with all of the businesses and other organizations within the community. She regularly sent out letters to all organizations to solicit information on needs and willingness to have volunteers. As a result of this information, the Community Based Learning Coordinator created a directory of resources that was updated on an ongoing basis. Students engaged in a wide range of creative projects including those directed at helping members of the community (i.e., visiting residents in nursing homes and home-bound elders, volunteering at childcare facilities, giving food to the local food shelf, helping to distribute toys to disadvantaged children, tutoring younger students, raising money for the Ronald McDonald house, assisting the Women, Infants & Children program, helping to promote Meals on Wheels, collecting hats and mittens for the local Family Center); those aimed at beautifying the community (i.e., planting a community garden, painting garbage cans with environmental messages, assisting in the landscaping of the school property), and meeting other community needs (i.e., assisting at the local animal shelter, helping to research and develop a farm-based recreational center, helping to establish a Teen Center, volunteering at the library).

Almost all students were highly motivated to provide community service. Based on both student and mentor reports, these projects had a positive impact not only on the community, but on student's self-esteem and sense of mastery. As one student stated, *"It makes me feel good, because it makes me feel, like, I'm a good person."* Many students discussed feeling proud of their accomplishments within the community. This was particularly important for students who had experienced academic failure in

their more traditional classes. For some students, this sense of personal success generalized to their performance in other areas of their life. *"My attitude's gotten a lot better since the Mentorship class, The fact that we go out and do community service, do nice things for other people. I feel better about myself. I feel like a nicer person, When you feel like a nicer person, you pay more attention in class."* Students also indicated that their good deeds in the community helped to counteract the negative reputation of teenagers.

d) Supporting mentor/advisors through a collaborative teaming model

At the start of each year, mentors met on a weekly basis for one hour after school at both school sites. These meetings were attended by all of the mentors, project staff, and the site principal (at Peoples Academy). As with the student mentor groups, the agenda for these meetings was generally set in a collaborative fashion. At these meetings, mentors had the opportunity to update each other on the progress of their groups, to plan for joint activities, to engage in shared problem-solving and decision-making, and to receive support from one another. The frequency of these meetings decreased across the year (i.e., biweekly, monthly) as the comfort level of the mentors running their groups and the familiarity with the process increased. In addition to the support received by the mentors through this group process, several of the mentor groups were "team taught" so that the mentors involved had the opportunity to share responsibilities and problem-solving on an ongoing basis.

Objective 3: To provide on-site training and technical assistance to the site steering committee and mentors to implement the mentor/advisor model and for utilizing best practices to serve all students, including those with or at risk for emotional disturbance, within their local school and community, and provide support for their families.

a) Support to Mentors

At the start of the project, all mentors participated in a two-day training designed to familiarize them with the framework of the program and the project components. Specifically, the training provided a general philosophy/overview of the program, reviewed the concept of resilience, discussed specifics of collaborative teaming, personal learning plans, community service learning, and mentoring, and focused on approaches for building communities, and teaching skills such as problem-solving and conflict resolution. In addition, mentors were given time to work on curriculum development.

In the subsequent years, orientation and training for new mentors was individualized and provided by project staff prior to the beginning of the school year. On-site visits were conducted at least twice per week by project staff to conduct observations of mentor groups and provide technical assistance. In addition, all of the mentors received support from project staff, as well as from their peers during the mentor peer support meetings.

At the end of each year, a one day mentor retreat was held off campus to reflect upon experience from the previous year and discuss the direction for the upcoming school year. After the second year at Rutland High School, the mentor staff discussed implementation issues and needed changes in

the model as applied to their school system. Based on that retreat, the mentors concluded that the model as stipulated in the grant was not workable within the structure of their school. Their primary modifications involved shifting the emphasis to a more individualized form of mentoring (with periodic group activities focused on relationship building and community service learning). Since the Fall of 1998, technical assistance has been provided to Rutland High only on an as requested basis. Peoples Academy continued to use the model as originally designed, with only minor modifications. Thus, the content of their retreats tended to focus on improving program components and curriculum and dealing with logistical issues.

During the first year of the project, mentors were asked to complete feedback sheets after each mentorship class, indicating the agenda for the day and process comments regarding the participation of the students and feedback regarding the curriculum activity. Based on their feedback, an initial curriculum guide was developed for use by mentors. This guide was revised each year, based on continuous feedback from mentors.

b) Support to Families

Part-time parent liaisons were hired at each site to inform, involve, and provide support to parents of students in the mentorship groups. Parent liaisons promoted parent involvement through a number of different avenues including: 1) the organization of family events (i.e., dinners, baseball games, barbecues, bowling) where parents had the opportunity to get to know the mentors in an informal setting and learn about the activities that their children were involved in; 2) helping to get a good turn-out of parent

participants at Advisory Council meetings; 3) calling each parent to discuss the positive progress that their child has made and updating them on the mentorship activities that their child has been involved in, 4) assisting with a project newsletter that was sent out annually to families and other community members; 5) attending project steering committee meetings and encouraging other parents to participate as well, and 6) participating in other school and community informational events. In addition, the parent liaison was actively involved in the evaluation process, by which she surveyed and interviewed parents regarding their child's skills and strengths, and gained information regarding their views on the school environment and its impact on their child.

Parent participation at Mentorship/Family events tended to be quite high and were favorably received by participants. Many parents commented on how this provided them one of the few opportunities (outside of sports events) to learn about what their children were doing at school, particularly with respect to positive experiences. As one parent indicated, *"These events are important. We get to see their accomplishments... and it's more like a one on one between mentors and parents and students."*

Objective 4: To replicate the mentor/advisor model in a second secondary school during the third and fourth years of the project.

Initially, the project was designed so that the model would be implemented at one high school site and then replicated 2 years later at a second site. However, a decision was made by the Project Director to begin implementation at two sites simultaneously. This decision was made because both sites had sufficient resources and scheduling flexibility to

implement the model immediately. In addition, it enabled both sites to receive technical assistance and support across 4 years. The two sites represented very different communities (one rural, one urban), thus, it was hoped it would provide more comprehensive information about the viability of the model in diverse settings.

However, at the end of the second grant year, a decision was made to pull back on the intensity of support provided to the Rutland site. This decision was made in light of the difficulty of implementing the model as stipulated in the grant at the Rutland site. It is felt that several key factors served as obstacles to implementation. First, the program at this site was run as an extracurricular activity, as opposed to a class. As a result, student attendance was erratic, making it difficult to develop a sense of group cohesion within each mentor group. Also, because it was an extracurricular activity (for which the mentors were not paid), it was not part of the mentors' regular job responsibilities and was thus, not a top priority. Second, the school district operates a number of alternative programs and schools for students with behavioral and learning challenges, thus limiting the pool of students who are the target population for this grant. In spite of these difficulties, the mentors at Rutland have continued to meet with the students involved in the mentor program on a regular basis, although with a different format. That is, most of the mentors have gone to an individualized mentoring model, as opposed to a group mentoring structure. Nevertheless, they remain highly committed to the values of the project and have continued to meet regularly to discuss how to modify the model components to fit the structure of their school.

Objective 5: To evaluate each component of the project to assess the impact on students with emotional disturbance, their families, their educators and related service providers, community service providers, and the community as a whole.

The purpose of the evaluation component was to determine the impact of the Mentor/Advisor model on the outcomes for youth with and at risk of emotional disturbance. The evaluation design consisted of a repeated measures matched control group design. The intervention group was composed of those students who participated in the Mentor/Advisor program. This included students who were identified as experiencing emotional disturbance, those considered to be "at-risk" of emotional and behavioral challenges, as well as those who had not been identified as at-risk. The control group consisted of a sample drawn from the remaining student body. The latter group of students participated in the typical routines of the regular high school program. Efforts were made to generate a matched control sample with respect to: risk status, grade level, and gender. Both the intervention and control groups were assessed using the same outcome measures. In addition, the entire student body served as a comparison group on certain specific educational outcomes (i.e., grades, attendance, discipline referrals).

Both quantitative and qualitative evaluation procedures were conducted. The quantitative component consisted of a series of questionnaires regarding skills and behaviors that were collected at baseline, at the end of the first year, and annually for the next three years. These measures were completed by the student, the parent, and the

mentor/advisor. A review of student records was also done at baseline and at the end of each semester. The qualitative component consisted of in-depth interviews that were conducted annually with students who were identified as experiencing emotional disturbance or at-risk of emotional disturbance, as well as with a small sample of non at-risk youth. In addition, interviews were also conducted annually with the parents and mentors of these youth. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that contribute to youth adjustment. In addition, students, parents, and mentors completed a program satisfaction survey at the end of each year.

a) Measures

Quantitative Measures

Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS, Epstein, Sharma, 1998)

This scale, completed by parents, was used to assess emotional and behavioral strengths of students. The BERS yields scores on five subscales including self-control, affective development, family involvement, school performance, and self-confidence. The scale is comprised of 52 statements describing behavioral strengths rated on a 4 point Likert scale. This scale was normed on both children not identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders and on children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Content, criteria and construct validity for the measure have been established.

Skill Survey

This measure was created specifically for the purposes of this project evaluation. It was composed of 40 items reflecting life skills that were

taught and modeled within the mentor groups. There were six subscales that included: collaborative teaming, personal goal planning, problem-solving/decision-making, conflict resolution, community service, self-appraisal. Students, parents, and mentors all completed this questionnaire, with respect to the student. On the student and parent versions, raters were instructed to indicate whether each item was important to them (yes/no). Then the rater assessed the student's skill level for each item on a 0-4 Likert scale. On the teacher version, mentors were instructed to indicate whether each skill had been taught and then rate each student's skill level on a 0-4 Likert. Given that there was high internal consistency among items, the total scores were used instead of subscale scores in the analyses.

School Climate Survey

This measure was also developed specifically for the purposes of this evaluation. However, items were drawn from existing climate surveys, as well as additional items created on the basis of the literature in this area. The measure consisted of 21 items relating to how students perceive the school climate (i.e., learning opportunities, teaching, peer relations, safety, etc). Each item was rated on a 1-4 Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This questionnaire was completed only by students in the mentor and control groups.

Responses to Stress

This questionnaire assesses the type of coping that students engage in. Student raters are asked to check off problems that have occurred during the school year relating specifically to interpersonal difficulties and to

indicate the overall level of stress related to these problems. Then, the rater must complete 57 items rated on a 1-4 Likert scale which describes types of coping practices. There are four overall sub-scales that relate to Effortful Engagement, Effortful Disengagement, Involuntary Engagement, and Involuntary Disengagement.

Demographic Questionnaire

This measure, completed by parents, was also created specifically for the purposes of this project. The questionnaire asks parents to indicate the family composition, parent educational level, occupation, and income level.

School Records

School record information was collected at the end of each semester to assess the impact of the mentor/advisor program on attendance, disciplinary referrals and actions, and grades. It was also used to determine drop-out information. Baseline data included an average of the two semesters prior to entry into the program.

Satisfaction Survey

Satisfaction surveys were completed by students, mentors, and parents at the end of each year to assess their satisfaction with the program. These questionnaires were specifically created by project staff.

Qualitative Measures

The interview protocol explored students' perceptions with respect to school climate (attitudes towards the school in general, their classes, the teachers), belonging (nature of their relationships with peers, teachers, family), mastery (identified strengths, acquisition of skills, level/sources of confidence), independence (perceived areas of control, leadership abilities,

sense of responsibility) and generosity (opportunities and impact of helping others and their community). In particular, the interviews explored the impact of the Mentor/Advisor program on their self-perceptions. Interviews were conducted with students identified as experiencing emotional disturbance or at risk of emotional disturbance, as well as a sample of students who were not deemed at risk. The mentors and parents of these students were interviewed as well.

The evaluation process was designed to assess the impact of the entire Mentor/Advisor model on the outcomes for youth with and at-risk of emotional disturbance. Thus, model components were not looked at separately. However, during the fourth year of the project, a fidelity check was conducted over a period of 6 weeks (Aug. 30, 1999 - October 8, 1999) by outside observers to determine whether the mentor groups were adhering to the key components of the model, with respect to the running of the mentor groups. Specifically, observers (or mentors on days that observers were not available) completed a daily fidelity checklist of each mentor group that rated 1) whether or not key activities/components occurred (i.e., check-in, roles, community service learning or other activity, opportunity to practice skills, processing, reflection), and 2) the degree of student engagement in each component (rated on a 1 to 4 point Likert scale with 1= little and 4 = a lot). Based on these ratings, two summary scores were derived: 1) "% Occurring" which refers to the percentage of key activities or components that were followed during that mentor class and 2) "Mean Engagement" which reflects the average student participation across activities. In addition, means were calculated for student

engagement in specific skills.

A total of 65 observations were completed during the 24-day observation period (greater than 90% of all possible observations). The results indicated that the mean fidelity regarding key mentor activities was approximately 90% (with a range of 44% to 100%). The mean for student engagement was 3.66 (with 4.0= a lot). In terms of specific skills, the mean for student engagement in these skills was: 3.59 for communication skills; 3.51 for reasoning and problem-solving; 3.50 for social responsibility; and 3.63 for personal development. Thus, it appears that the mentor groups demonstrated relatively high fidelity to the model, with correspondingly high student involvement in the activities and skills.

b) Quantitative Analyses

As indicated, it was difficult to obtain a matched control sample because those students and parents who consented to be in the control group, tended to reflect non-risk status. Thus, the comparisons between mentor and control students tend to reflect better baseline performance on the part of the controls on all measures. There is some indication that the mentor students begin to demonstrate improved performance on certain indicators (i.e., days absent, disciplinary referrals) while students in the control group show a gradual trend towards less favorable performance on these indicators (i.e. increase in days absent, increased discipline referrals). However, these changes over time do not reach statistically significant levels. With respect to grades, while the control group starts significantly higher, there were no significant changes over time for either group. Both the mentor and control groups show similar declines on measures of

perceived skill and school climate satisfaction over time.

Given that the control and mentor groups were not equally matched, a second level of analyses were conducted to determine whether the Mentorship project had a differential impact on students deemed at-risk vs. those who were not considered at-risk. Risk was defined in two separate ways. First, the group was separated based on whether or not a student was receiving supplemental educational services through special education, ACT 504 or ACT 230. Those who did receive such services were considered "at-risk". On the basis of this grouping, students in the "at-risk" group showed a decline in days absent over 4 semesters, while the non at-risk remained about the same. Also of interest, while the non at-risk group demonstrated a decline in performance on the skill survey over time, the at-risk did not demonstrate such a decline.

The definition of risk was then broadened to include students who either received supplemental educational services or had failed at least 2 classes at baseline. Again, the at-risk group showed a decline in days absent (from 6 to 2/semester), while the non at-risk group showed a slight increase in days absent (from 6 to 8/semester), although these group differences do not reach statistical significance. On the student skill survey, the scores for the non-risk group go down over the course of one year, while the at-risk scores increase slightly. These group differences across time were significant at the 0.05 level. This was particularly true for males vs. females. That is, for the at-risk group, male mean total scores on the Skill Survey increased from a mean of 2.59 (on a 0-4 Likert scale, with 2 corresponding to sometimes/somewhat and 3= often/a lot) to a mean of 3.0

from time 1 to time 3 (2 semesters later). In contrast, at-risk female scores declined slightly over this same time period from a mean of 2.63 to a mean of 2.43. This gender difference in the at-risk sample was significant at the $p < .05$ level.

In contrast, at-risk females showed better results on other indicators. In terms of absenteeism, at-risk males and females show a slight downward trend from Time 1 to Time 2. However, from Time 2 to Time 3, males show a significant increase in absenteeism (from 6.8 days/semester to 10.64 days/semester), while the absentee rate for at-risk females continues to decline slightly (from 5.79 days/semester to 4.16 days/semester). However, because of the very small sample sizes for these subgroups (N=13, N=14), it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions. In terms of GPA, the scores for at-risk males drop slightly from Time 1 to 3 (73.26 to 69.09); while the scores for at-risk females increase slightly over this same time period (75.82 to 78.70). While this gender difference is not significant at the .05 level, the interaction effect is significant at the .11 level. However, once again, the sample sizes for these subgroups were quite small (N=13; N=14).

The overall mentor student sample was also grouped according to those who received free or reduced lunch vs. those who did not. On most measures, there was not a significant difference between the two groups over time. However, on the Student Skill Survey, both groups show a decline in scores over time, with the "no free lunch" group demonstrating a steeper decline than the "free or reduced lunch" group. However, the group differences did not reach levels of significance.

On the Parent Skill Survey, parents in the control group rated their

children's performance higher at baseline, as compared to the ratings by parents of children in the Mentorship program. That is, the mean baseline rating among control parents (N=16), was 2.89, compared with the mean baseline rating of parents of children in the Mentorship program (N=39) which was 2.49 (on a 0-4 likert scale; 2=sometimes/somewhat; 3= often/a lot). However, it is difficult to draw conclusion regarding the impact of the Mentorship program over time on this measure because a relatively small number of parents completed the Parent Skill Survey at times 2 and 3.

Qualitative Analyses

In addition to the quantitative analyses, the qualitative analyses of the interview data from students, parents, and mentors, was also conducted. A summary article, "Students Speak Out: Preliminary Qualitative Findings of a Mentor/Advisor Project" was published in the 14th Annual Conference Proceedings of a System of Care for Children's Mental Health: Expanding the Research Base (2001). This article focuses on the students' experience in their mentor groups, with respect to belonging, autonomy, and generosity. A second summary looks more in depth at the issues of connection and autonomy, particularly as they relate to the field of developmental psychology. This latter summary is currently an unpublished manuscript.

Objective 6: To disseminate the results of the Mentor/Advisor model implementation in Vermont and across the nation.

Dissemination activities have been carried out on both a local and national level. Specifically, these activities have included: 1) presentations at local, statewide, and national conferences; 2) annual project newsletters; 3) news articles in local and state newspapers; 4) project brochure

distributed locally to parents and community members, and at state and national conferences; 5) letters to parents updating them on project activities; 6) student created web pages; and, 7) journal articles. To the greatest extent possible, students and parents were encouraged to participate in dissemination activities.

a) Conference Presentations

- 21st Annual Conference on Severe Behavior Disorders of Children and Youth (TECBD), Scottsdale, Arizona, November, '97
- Green Mountain Teen Prevention Conference, Castleton, VT, April '98; '99
- Mentoring Makes A Difference, Burlington, VT April, '98; '99, '00, '01
- Governors Prevention Conference, Killington, VT, May '98; '01
- Special Education Leadership Academy, Essex, VT , August '98
- "Focus on the Journey" Transition Conference, Vermont, October '98
- Youth Violence Prevention Conference, Boston, April '99
- Council on Exceptional Children, North Carolina, April '99
- Council on Exceptional Children, Vancouver, April '00
- Council on Exceptional Children, Kansas City, Mo., April '01

b) Poster Sessions

- 1997 OSEP Research Project Directors' Conference, Washington, D. C., July 17, 1997.
- Community Youth Assets Day, Morrisville, VT., February '98
- 1998 OSEP Research Project Directors' Conference, Washington, D.C., July 16, 1998.

- 13th Annual Research Conference sponsored by the Florida Mental Health Institute: A System of Care for Children's Mental Health; Expanding the Research Base, Tampa, FL, March 5-8, 2000.

c) Publications

Ryan, A. K. (2001). *Strengthening the Safety Net: How Schools Can Help Youth With Emotional and Behavioral Needs Complete Their High School Education and Prepare for Life After School.* Burlington, VT: School Research Office, University of Vermont.

Welkowitz, J., Broer, S., Topper, K., Thomas, C., Backus, L., Hamilton, R. (2001). Students speak out: Preliminary qualitative findings of a Mentor/Advisor Project. In Newman, C., Liberton, C, Kutash, K., Friedman, R. (Eds.). *The 13th Annual Research Conference Proceedings, A System of Care for Children's Mental Health: Expanding the Research Base.* Tampa, University of South Florida, The Louis do la Parte Florida Mental health Institute, Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health.

Welkowitz, J., Backus, L., Topper, K. (September 1999). "It's Our Classroom": Students Take Charge. *ASCD On-Line.*

- Annual Project Newsletters
- Project Brochure
- News articles in local and state newspapers and newsletters

IV. DISCUSSION

The project set out to establish a Mentor/Advisor Program in a regular public high school to support students at risk of emotional and behavioral

challenges. The model was successfully implemented in one rural high school in Vermont. Throughout the four years, 102 students from that high school voluntarily participated in the project. Almost two-thirds went on to take the Mentorship class for at least a second semester. The model was also implemented for two years in a more urban high school in Vermont, serving 58 students. However, the model was modified in the second school after two years to reflect a more individualized mentoring model that fit better into the existing structure of their school.

With respect to the qualitative data, interviews with students indicated that participation in the mentor groups had a positive impact with respect to their relationships, ability to deal with conflict, leadership and initiative skills and increased self-esteem from participating in projects that gave back to their community. Parents who were interviewed also noted that their children gained skills, particularly in the areas of conflict resolution, anger management, coping with challenges (including peer pressure), making effective choices, and relationship building (particularly for students who were isolated). Several parents commented on how these skills were generalized to different settings. A number of parents emphasized that their children seemed to gain increased confidence through their participation in the mentorship project. Parents also reflected on how the mentorship project helped to connect them with their children through the informal events, assisting their children with their community service activities, and giving them something to talk about that was not the typical academic content.

The quantitative data shows a trend towards improvement in absenteeism and disciplinary referrals among students in the mentor groups vs. those in the control group, although this does not reach levels of statistical significance. Of interest, is the differential impact that the Mentorship project appears to have on students who met the criteria for "at-risk." Students in the at-risk group do appear to demonstrate reductions in absenteeism and show slight improvements on a measure of skills over time. At-risk males in particular, show a significant improvement on a skills measure (while the scores for female at-risk students declined). However, at-risk females tended to do better with respect to attendance and grades vs. their male counterparts.

Lessons Learned

Successful implementation of the model was dependent on having school structures that can accommodate this program. Specifically, the model appeared to work best when the school schedule had an elective period during which time the mentor groups could be held concurrently. In addition, attendance and adherence to the model was highest when mentor groups were run as credit bearing courses during the school day, as opposed to an after school program. The creation of on-site coordinator position (at-least part-time) who could maintain communication between groups, interface with community organizations, plan events, engage in public relations activities, and deal with logistics, appeared to be instrumental in the smooth running of the project. Although the model was designed to have primarily regular educators serving as mentors, this proved to be difficult within the constraints of the school scheduling practices. Even

with an elective period, regular education teachers often had to give up a planning period in order to maintain their role as mentor. Thus, over time, it tended to be guidance personnel and special educators who continued with the project, in part because of the greater flexibility (although not fewer work demands!) in their schedules.

With respect to the recruitment and maintenance of students in the groups, having the class offered as a voluntary elective appeared to work best. Those students who felt "forced" into this option (i.e., no other classes available) tended to be more resentful and less likely to stick with the program over time. In terms of the balance of students within each group, having a diverse mix proved critically important. As indicated above, many students spoke of the ability to become friends with students who they would not typically associate with. In addition, when groups were weighted too heavily with youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties, it became extraordinarily difficult for the mentor to facilitate the group in an effective manner.

Initially, the project was designed to give students a high degree of freedom and choice with respect to the development or selection of community service projects and individualized learning projects. However, we learned over time, that this was difficult for many students because of their lack of experience in self-directed learning, and lack of exposure to possible options. Thus, in the latter years of the project, a resource book was developed which listed possible community projects. Some mentors also chose to have their students try a variety of short-term projects in the first couple months to get ideas for possible community projects. In terms

of the individualized learning plans, this component was greatly assisted with the addition of a community volunteer who could assist in finding community members who could mentor students in areas of specific interest.

The parent liaison position proved important in keeping parents involved with project activities on a regular basis and communicating their input and suggestions to project staff. In the year after the grant ended, the school continued to support the critical role of the on-site coordinator and provided funds for community service learning and other activities. However, there was not continued funding available for the parent liaison position. As a result, it was reportedly more difficult to maintain ongoing connections with parents.

In terms of research design, there were numerous difficulties inherent in the nature of it being applied research. Finding a matched control group was extraordinarily difficult. Those students and parents who consented to participate in the control group and complete measures on a regular basis (without participating in the mentorship project), tended to be high achieving students from higher socio-economic backgrounds than those in the mentor groups. There were few "at-risk " students among the control sample. With respect to the collection of data among the mentor sample, student measures had a relatively high return rate because they were administered during mentor groups. However, the return rate on parent measures was considerably lower (done through mailing with efforts at in-person follow-ups). Furthermore, because students came into the program at different times and stayed for varying lengths of time

(sometimes missing a semester and then returning), it complicated the analysis of the data.

Another difficulty of the research design was the inability to determine which components of the model might be most effective. In the current design, the model was evaluated with respect to its impact as a whole. While a fidelity check was conducted to determine adherence to the model, it might be interesting in the future to assess each component separately. Thus, some groups could just have the mentoring component, others the community service learning, others just the individualized learning plans to determine which is the most effective component.

V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION/CHANGES

During the year following the end of on-site university involvement (2000-2001), the school district made a decision to continue to fund the mentorship project. This included funding a half-time on-site coordinator, providing $4000 to support student activities, and designating 6 school staff members who would serve as mentors for approximately 36 students. In addition, they added a credit-bearing long-block service learning class that was created by a mentorship student.

No other changes have occurred aside from those described in the narrative above.

REFERENCES

Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M. & VanBrockern, S. (1990). The Circle of Courage. Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

Epstein, M. & Sharma, J. (1998). Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale. A Strength Based Approach to Assessment. Austin, Texas: PRO-ED.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

REPRODUCTION BASIS

☐ This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket) form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☑ This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").