

JUNE 2010

# UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Fulfilling the Promise of Big Brothers Big Sisters  
and the Bigs and Littles They Represent

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**A report by Civic Enterprises**

In association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates  
**For Big Brothers Big Sisters**



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# AN OPEN LETTER TO AMERICA

Today in America, there are 10 million children ages 6 to 17 severely at-risk of not reaching productive adulthood. These children often live in low-income communities, navigate neighborhoods marked by violence, attend schools without high expectations and supports that would enable them to succeed, and come from single-parent families without consistent financial and emotional support. On average, minority children are 50 percent less likely than white children to receive enough supports to grow up to be productive adults. Severely at-risk children, whose lives contain little or none of the necessary supports required to successfully make this passage, are more likely to engage in drug and alcohol abuse, underperform academically, suffer from low self-esteem, drop out of high school, have lower earning potential later in life, and be absent from civic life.

Research shows that Big Brothers Big Sisters has an important and measurable impact on the lives of the 245,000 children it serves, many of whom are severely at-risk. By providing these children with a caring and nurturing adult, both its community-based and school-based mentoring programs have revealed significant decreases in risky behaviors and improvements in self-esteem and academic performance. While the mentoring administered by Big Brothers Big Sisters satisfies one of the critical factors for positive youth development, mentoring alone is not enough to improve the life chances of all children and ensure that they grow up to be successful and well-adjusted adults.

In an effort to better understand the lives and circumstances of at-risk children that Big Brothers Big Sisters serves and to inform a possible engagement and advocacy strategy, a nation-wide survey and a series of focus groups were conducted. This research highlights the voices of current and former mentors with Big Brothers Big Sisters (“Bigs”) and the children they mentor (“Littles”) throughout the United States in large cities, suburbs, and small towns.

**A primary purpose of this report is to lift up the voices of Bigs and Littles and to paint a more comprehensive picture of the lives that Littles lead and the multiple barriers they face when trying to achieve their goals. We wanted to highlight their stories and to offer our own views of next steps for Big Brothers Big Sisters as it undergoes a nationwide strategic planning process to initiate an engagement and advocacy strategy that will provide at-risk children the tools they need to achieve success. We also hope this report will help leverage the untapped potential of former mentors, website visitors who do not become mentors, and other potential volunteers who could become champions of children. The futures of millions of children are at stake.**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The central message of this report is that most Littles have confidence they will achieve their future goals and see the importance of working hard and graduating from college. Many face the challenges, however, of ruptured families and unsafe neighborhoods, bad influences from adults and peers in their lives, and schools marked by low expectations and insufficient student supports, that put those future goals at risk. Although the challenges at-risk children face are great, research shows that mentoring makes a significant positive difference in their lives, Littles and Bigs agree that good schools and positive role models would help Littles the most, and, ultimately, the Big experience emboldens volunteers to do more to mitigate these challenges on the local level and support an engagement and advocacy strategy at the national level.

## THE BARRIERS LITTLES FACE

**Littles, regardless of race, gender, region, and living situation, asserted that the biggest problems they face are bad influences, inadequate schooling, drugs, and unsafe neighborhoods. They also had ideas for what could be done to address these barriers.**

- **Over half of Littles (58 percent) said that too many bad influences leading kids in the wrong direction was a problem in their neighborhoods.** Among these bad influences, half of Littles (51 percent) said that there are too many people in their neighborhoods who do drugs and almost as many (48 percent) said that drug and alcohol usage is the biggest challenge that kids face when it comes to accomplishing their future goals.
- **Littles said working hard in school and pursuing post-secondary education were an integral part of becoming successful adults.** Nearly all Littles said that working hard in school (97 percent), going to school and getting a good education (95 percent), and graduating from college (94) were very important to helping them achieve their goals later in life. Additionally, four out of five Littles (81 percent) said that working hard outside of school was also very important to enabling them to achieve their future goals. Only one out of three (34 percent) said that being lucky was very important to helping them achieve their goals.
- **Despite this emphasis on the importance of education, few Littles expressed an interest in their current education.** Almost a quarter of Littles (23 percent) said the biggest challenge

“ Littles asserted that the biggest problems they face are bad influences, inadequate schooling, drugs, and unsafe neighborhoods ”

children face was attending schools that don't teach kids what they need to know, a challenge that came second only to drugs and alcohol. Nearly one in three (29 percent) Littles said they never enjoy doing their homework.

- **Despite the barriers they face, nearly all Littles (94 percent) said they had a lot or some confidence they would achieve their future goals.** Almost all of Littles (93 percent) said that having adults who care and look out for them and having adult role models or other adults they could look up to (86 percent) were very important to helping them achieve their goals. Most Littles (85 percent) said that they always enjoy spending time with their Bigs and almost as many (80 percent) said they feel like their Bigs help them a lot.
- **Littles said that improved schools and more role models would give kids the best chance to succeed.** Nearly three in 10 Littles (28 percent) said that making sure all kids have a good school to go to would be the first thing they would do to give kids the best chance to reach productive adulthood, which was the leading solution they identified. One in four (24 percent) said that making sure all kids have a role model or mentor would be their first action.

## THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF BIGS

**Bigs said that their experiences with their Littles profoundly changed their perspectives on the challenges that at-risk youth face. Bigs asserted that their top concerns for their Littles were about education and negative influences. They agreed with their Littles that improved schools and more role models would do the most to help.**

- **Bigs, like Littles, said that their top concerns for their Littles were about education and negative influences.** Over half of Bigs (56 percent) said they worry their Littles were not getting the education they will need to support themselves as adults. One out of three Bigs (34 percent) said that they were worried their Littles would not complete their high school education. Many of them also said that giving in to peer

pressure (51 percent) and repeating a bad example set by their parents (40 percent) or older siblings (27 percent) were concerns they had for their Littles.

- **Bigs said they felt like these influences were large enough that they would inhibit their Littles from achieving their goals.** More than two out of five Bigs (44 percent) said that adults in their lives who set negative examples were a challenge that will stand in the way of their Littles and their goals. Nearly half of Bigs (46 percent) said that lack of motivation or discipline and almost as many (43 percent) said that peer pressure were challenges that could derail their Littles' goals.
- **Bigs also worried about tough life circumstances that their Littles face.** More than one out of three Bigs (37 percent) said that not having enough to do after school was a barrier to the future success of their Littles. Nearly three in 10 Bigs said that inappropriate living conditions (29 percent), poor quality schools (25 percent), living in an unsafe neighborhood (27 percent), not having enough safe places to play (25 percent), and family members involved in the legal system (25 percent) were very or fairly serious challenges that marked their Littles' lives. One in five (22 percent) said that adults in their lives who abuse drugs or alcohol were barriers in the lives of their Littles.

## BIGS SHARE INSIGHTS ON HOW TO HELP YOUTH

- **Bigs said their experience left them wanting to do more.** More than four out of five Bigs (84 percent) said their experience has changed the way they look at the challenges that at-risk youth face a great deal or a fair amount and nearly as many (82 percent) said their experience as Bigs left them feeling like they wished they could do more to help their Littles and children like them.
- **These feelings of wanting to do more could lay the foundation for a program aimed at giving all kids a better chance at success.** Seven in 10 Bigs (69 percent) already think of themselves as "champions for children." Nearly three out of four Bigs (73 percent) said that they would be very or fairly interested in a program that would enlist current and former Bigs as "champions

for children.” Four out of five Bigs (82 percent) said that they believe Bigs working together could make a very significant or significant impact on ensuring that all children have a better chance for success.

- **More than three out of four Bigs (78 percent) said that encouraging other individuals to be more involved in directly helping children was more important than working to change public policy.** To that end, three out of five Bigs (62 percent) said that encouraging business, religious, and other community leaders to get more involved and nearly as many (61 percent) said that encouraging other people like themselves to get involved should be a primary goal of an advocacy campaign by Big Brothers Big Sisters.
- **Nearly all Bigs (95 percent) support Big Brothers Big Sisters advocating for all children, not just the ones in the program.** Indeed, while Bigs were more interested in being engaged at the local level, they overwhelmingly supported the notion of the organization as a whole advocating on behalf on all children and nearly as many (82 percent) asserted that advocating for all children was a continuation of the organization’s mission.

## WHAT BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS CAN DO

**As Big Brothers Big Sisters continues to evaluate next steps and work in partnership with its agencies around the United States, we recommend that it consider the following options to inform these deliberations. Some options might be implemented soon, while others could be phased in over time. Either way, such steps could enhance the effectiveness of Big Brothers Big Sisters and the lives of children across America:**

### IN THE NATION: ADVOCACY AND RESEARCH

- **Expand Core Mission of Best-Practices Mentoring.** In our survey, Littles and Bigs overwhelmingly reinforced the core mission of Big Brothers Big Sisters—to continue to expand the

number of mentors for at-risk youth. Given the success of best practices mentoring, Big Brothers Big Sisters should view any other engagement and advocacy strategies through this lens and determine whether such strategies advance its core mission. To create new momentum and funding support for mentoring, Big Brothers Big Sisters should set another goal to expand the number of children reached by a caring adult mentor within a period of time.

- **Federal, State, and Local Elected Officials.** Big Brothers Big Sisters should enlist champions in the Congress, among the nation’s Governors, and within the National Council of State Legislators, the National League of Cities, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors to place mentoring high on the public agenda and advocate for support at the national, state, and local levels. These officials can speak to the role of Big Brothers Big Sisters as a results-driven and evidence-backed organization that makes a difference in our communities and in the lives of our nation’s children.
- **Champions for Children Network.** Big Brothers Big Sisters should leverage its partnerships with key national organizations, such as the America’s Promise Alliance, the U.S. Department of Education, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, to enhance its efforts on the issues that Littles and Bigs identified, such as high school and college graduation, reduction of drug and alcohol abuse, and positive role modeling in safe neighborhoods. Big Brothers Big Sisters should identify organizations not already part of the America’s Promise Alliance and link them together into a subgroup of the alliance which will coordinate for communications purposes, mobilize and direct potential volunteers, and enlist donors to help.
- **National Report Card.** The champions for children network, in conjunction with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, should issue a national report card every year that provides a baseline, measures the extent of the children’s population that needs special help, and charts progress, including for mentoring and the goal Big Brothers Big Sisters has set to expand it. The report card will identify

heartening or troubling trends, gauge public and private investments in positive youth development supports, and issue a “grade.”

- **Online Network of Alumni Bigs and Littles and Volunteers.** The national office should create an online network that will: 1) enable current and former Bigs and Littles to share their success stories of how mentoring made a difference in their lives; 2) inform the network of pending budgets and legislation that will require action or support; 3) enlist alumni to attract other funding partners from the private sector; and (4) include a portal for active Bigs that will enable them to provide practical support, such as activities in the community and solutions to common problems.
- **Commission future research.** Big Brothers Big Sisters, in conjunction with the champions for children network, should commission longitudinal studies and other research that will support and strengthen current program practices, expose the ways in which mentoring relationships support positive youth development in schools and communities, and reveal the dynamics of the mentor/mentee relationship to reduce the premature ending of relationships that could be detrimental to youth. This research would not only inform best practices, but would also solidify the mentoring field as reputable, results-driven, and evidence-based.
- **Foster a college-going culture.** Given the most powerful and highly leveraged way to address inequality is to ensure students have a meaningful post-secondary degree, whether that be a technical or four-year degree, Big Brothers Big Sisters should foster a college-going culture among Littles and other at-risk children. This should be an important pillar in the training of Bigs.

## IN THE STATES

- **Robust State Associations.** The national office should take steps to ensure that each state, as some states do today, has a functional and active state association that advocates for funds for mentoring on the state level that are then funneled to local agencies. Strong state associations should be enlisted to share their best practices advocacy with

other states that are working to strengthen their efforts and should be core partners in the national advocacy network.

- **State Alliances.** State associations should collaborate with other groups at the state level that focus on youth development and advocate for policies beneficial to children, such as CHIP expansions, raising the compulsory school age, or school reform. If such alliances already exist, Big Brothers Big Sisters should play an active leadership role in them. This state-based engagement and advocacy will reaffirm Big Brothers Big Sisters’ role as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve schools, reduce violence, and strengthen families and communities.

## IN AGENCIES AND COMMUNITIES

- **Champions for Children Networks.** Big Brothers Big Sisters should engage experienced Bigs (those who have volunteered for at least one year) to work side-by-side as champions for children on projects that engage other local leaders, including school board members, city councilors, corporate executives, veterans, and religious leaders, to improve the life chances of at-risk children. These champions for children could become the local grassroots advocates for more support for mentoring. In addition to working on issues that affect all children, like ensuring that all students graduate from high school work-and-college-ready, these initiatives would be tailored to the local needs of Littles, such as cleaner, safer, and drug-free neighborhoods. These initiatives could take place from rural towns in the South to large metropolitan areas of the North and West. Three or four local Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies should convene Bigs to discuss what they think a local engagement and advocacy strategy should look like. This information should be used to inform the creation of these champions for children networks throughout the federation. Additionally, Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies should establish strong local affiliations with existing organizations that have the infrastructure to support more volunteers for such efforts. Specific goals should be set for these champions for children networks—for example, tangible declines in teenage drug abuse;

building playgrounds to replace unsafe and unclean public spaces; more community-based supports for students at-risk of dropping out of high school; and in all cases local reports to the network showing accountability for results.

- **Innovation Councils for Youth.** Local Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies should partner with other local best-practices organizations that specialize in each of the critical youth development support categories to coordinate efforts to serve children across sectors. If such councils already exist, Big Brothers Big Sisters should play an active leadership role in them. Among other things determined at the local level, these organizations will engage children in after-school activities, offer tutoring services, and provide families with much needed supports. Local innovations that are making significant strides in helping at-risk youth should be shared by local agencies with the national Big Brothers Big Sisters office and, potentially, the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation.
- **Mentoring as a Comprehensive Strategy.** Those veteran Bigs, Littles, and local agency volunteer board members interested in changing policy should be provided with training toolkits on positive youth development, the role of mentoring in making a difference in communities and children’s lives, and advocacy. They will be best positioned to advocate for policies at the local, state, and federal levels that promote the future success of our communities’ children and for mentoring as part of a comprehensive strategy for better schools and safer communities.
- **Bigs as Adult Advocates.** During initial training and orientation, Bigs should be trained on how they can become adult advocates for Littles, particularly of Littles trapped in the 2,000 “dropout factory” public schools, which graduate less than 60 percent of their students. They should be made aware of supports that will help Littles stay on track to achieve their goals and graduate from high school with their class, including addressing the three early warning signs of potential dropout: absenteeism, poor behavior, and course failure.



// Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to live in households with lower overall incomes, earn less themselves, achieve lower levels of education, be less likely to be gainfully employed, and have a greater chance of living in or near poverty //



# UNTAPPED POTENTIAL:

## FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS AND THE BIGS AND LITTLES THEY REPRESENT

### INTRODUCTION

American children represent a great, untapped potential in our country. For many young people, choices are limited and the goal of productive adulthood is a remote one. Nationally, 13 million children live below the federal poverty line, nearly 17 million live in families where no parent has full-time year-round employment, and more than 19 million live in single-parent families.<sup>1</sup> Black children are significantly more likely to experience these three conditions when compared to their white and Hispanic peers. Additionally, more than 1.7 million children have an incarcerated parent.<sup>2</sup> The gap is widest when comparing black and white children. Black children are nearly three times more likely to live in single-parent households and more than seven times more likely to have a parent in prison than their white peers. Hispanic and black children are three times more likely to live below the poverty line than white children.<sup>3</sup> These barriers are present in the lives of children not only in urban areas, but in suburban and rural environments as well.<sup>4</sup>

The world that children grow up in today is largely unchanged from that of a decade or even two decades ago and, in some cases, children are worse off. Although the robust economy of the 1990s heralded a reduction in the number of children living in poverty, that number has steadily increased since 2000.<sup>5</sup> The number of children living in single-parent households consistently increased for the latter half of the 20th century and has remained relatively stable over the last decade.<sup>6</sup> Since 1991, the growth in the number of incarcerated parents with children has risen precipitously.<sup>7</sup> Aside from the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics and the annual KIDS COUNT reports produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, there is little data that is consistent in reporting on the condition of all children below the age of 18. Some researchers who focus on children's issues posit that this contributes to the perception that children are doing well when compared to other demographics in society.<sup>8</sup>

Our report is written from the perspective of Littles and Bigs in the context of what we know from decades of studies about the problems that children face. This report paints a picture of who these children are, shares their insights and reflections about the barriers they face, and offers ways forward for Big Brothers Big Sisters as it undergoes a nationwide strategic planning process to initiate an engagement and advocacy strategy that will provide at-risk children with the tools they need to achieve success.

### CONSEQUENCES OF CHILDHOOD BARRIERS

Living in concentrated poverty exacts a day-to-day toll on the people who experience it and threatens to transmit disadvantaged circumstances across generations.<sup>9</sup> Residents who live in poor neighborhoods are more likely to pay more for basic goods and services, suffer from weak employment networks and ambitions, be faced with limited educational opportunity, experience higher incidences of crime, especially violent crime, exhibit diminished health, and live in homes that have depressed market value. And they are more likely than their higher-income peers to pass these conditions onto their own children.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from these challenges, growing up in poverty can have consequences that affect the future potential of those who experience it. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to live in households with lower overall incomes, earn less themselves, achieve lower levels of education, be less likely to be gainfully employed, and have a greater chance of living in or near poverty than their peers who did not experience childhood poverty.<sup>11</sup> These outcomes are true even of children who are pushed into—as opposed to being born into—poverty due to a prevailing recession.<sup>12</sup> These challenges of poverty extend beyond the individual children that they affect. Research suggests that the costs to the United States associated with childhood poverty total about \$500 billion each year.

More specifically, researchers estimate that childhood poverty reduces productivity and economic output by 1.3 percent of GDP, raises the costs of crime by 1.3 percent of GDP, and raises health expenditures and reduces the value of health by 1.2 percent of GDP.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, children who grow up in the absence of a biological parent are more likely to score lower on standardized tests, view themselves with less academic potential, drop out of high school, become teen parents, experience a higher prevalence of behavioral and psychological problems, earn less as adults, and be unemployed more frequently as adults. They are less likely to attend college and, if they do attend, are less likely to graduate.<sup>14</sup> Studies on positive youth development assert that all children need adequate nutrition, health, and shelter; multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers; challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences; meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership; physical and emotional safety and health; and emotionally and financially stable home environments.<sup>15</sup> Research also tells us that only 2 percent of those youth who finish high school, work full-time, and marry before having children end up poor, while about three-fourths of youth who do none of these things are poor in any given year.<sup>16</sup>

This report seeks to put a face on these alarming statistics and capture how the day-to-day and long-term barriers and consequences intersect in the lives of the children that Big Brothers Big Sisters serves. It will inform the steps the organization should take, working in concert with a strategic planning process underway, as it moves forward to better serve the children already in its care and to reach out to those at-risk youth without support.

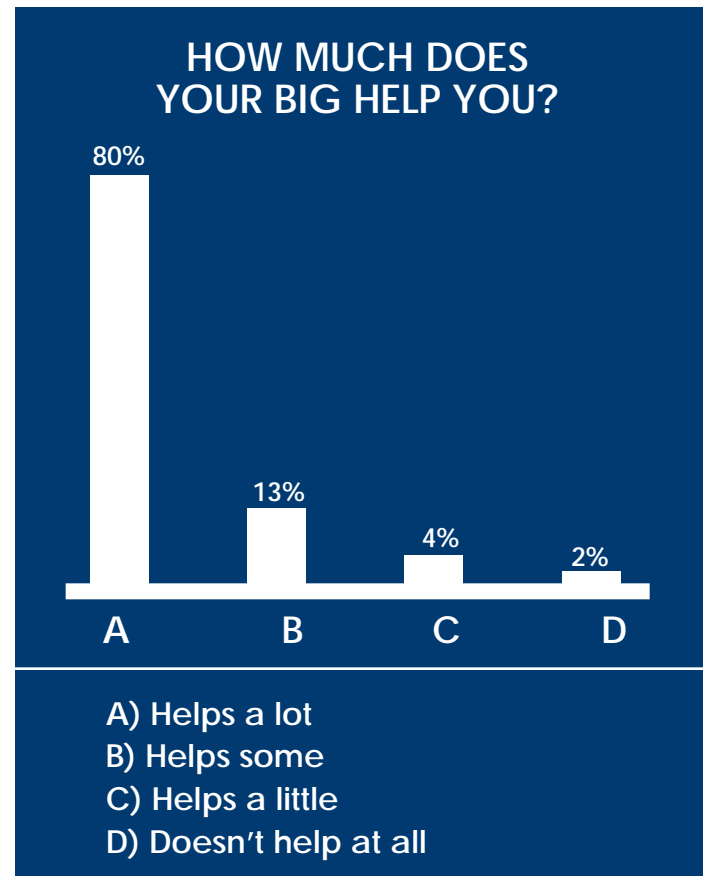
## MENTORING'S IMPACT ON AT-RISK YOUTH

Natural mentoring—that mentoring that naturally occurs with a teacher, a coach, or other non-parental adult—is associated with a range of positive outcomes on youth in several realms, including education and work (high-school completion, college attendance, employment), mental health (heightened self-esteem, life satisfaction), problem behavior (lower gang membership and reduction in fighting and risk taking), and health (exercise, lifestyle choices).<sup>17</sup> Mentoring

programs, which aim to provide these relationships where they may not naturally occur, offer similarly positive effects, when mentors receive adequate training and support and the mentor and mentee meet consistently for at least one year. Under these circumstances, the benefits of mentoring extend a year or more beyond the end of the youth's participation in the program.<sup>18</sup>

Participants in Big Brother Big Sisters have attested to the impact the organization has on their lives. As one Little in our focus group said, when speaking about her Big Sister, "She helped me believe in myself. I used not to like myself because of the skin I'm in and my name." In our survey, most Littles said that they always enjoy spending time with their Bigs and almost as many said they feel like their Bigs help them a lot. According to research, children matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister have been found to be less likely to initiate drug or alcohol use or to hit someone. They are also less likely to skip school and more likely to report feeling more competent about doing schoolwork.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the positive impacts, mentoring is limited in its ability to improve the lives of at-risk youth. The Big Brothers Big Sisters's school-based program has been



found to improve outcomes for children in a range of areas, including their academic attitude, performance, and behaviors. By the next school year, however, impacts were only sustained in one area: Littles were less likely to have started skipping school. For those whose participation ended in the first year, none of the positive school-related impacts were sustained.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, youth who are overwhelmed by social and behavioral problems appear to be less likely to experience the strong, enduring ties with mentors that are necessary for positive impacts.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, adverse environments, such as family instability and socioeconomic disadvantage, can inhibit the formation of mentoring relationships.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, the results of mentoring are generally modest and best used as a prevention, rather than as an intervention, strategy due to its limitations. Indeed, mentoring relationships on their own are not enough to meet the needs of at-risk youth and should be coupled with more comprehensive interventions.<sup>23</sup>

## THE LIVES OF LITTLES

Currently, Big Brothers Big Sisters is the largest mentoring organization in the United States, boasting 245,000 active mentor matches as of 2009, up from 138,500 in 1998. Roughly half of those matches are administered through their school-based mentoring program and more than 35,000 are matches for children with incarcerated parents. The expansion consisted of the targeting of certain demographics—such as children living in a single-parent household, growing up in poverty, and coping with parental incarceration—to ensure that they are serving the children who are the most in need.<sup>24</sup>

To gain a better understanding of the children that the organization serves and their concomitant struggles, we went right to the source: the Littles themselves and the Bigs that have relationships with them. This report is based on four focus groups of ethnically and racially diverse Bigs and Littles who were at least 12 years of age. It is also based on a national survey of 597 Bigs and 405 Littles throughout the country—including in large cities, suburbs, and small towns. The methodology we used for surveying Bigs and Littles is set forth in more detail in the appendices.

Our survey shows that although Littles face significant barriers to their future success, they recognize the power of a loving, caring adult to help them reach their goals. It also shows that they are confident that they can achieve their goals and understand what it takes to do so:

**94%** of Littles have a lot or some confidence they can achieve their future goals

**93%** said it was very important to have adults that care and look out for them

**86%** said it was very important to have role models they could look up to

**80%** said they feel like their Bigs help them a lot

**97%** said working hard in school was very important

**95%** said going to school and getting a good education was very important

**94%** said graduating from college was very important

The principle barriers Littles identified were inadequate education, bad influences, drugs and alcohol, and unsafe neighborhoods.

## CHALLENGES LITTLES FACE

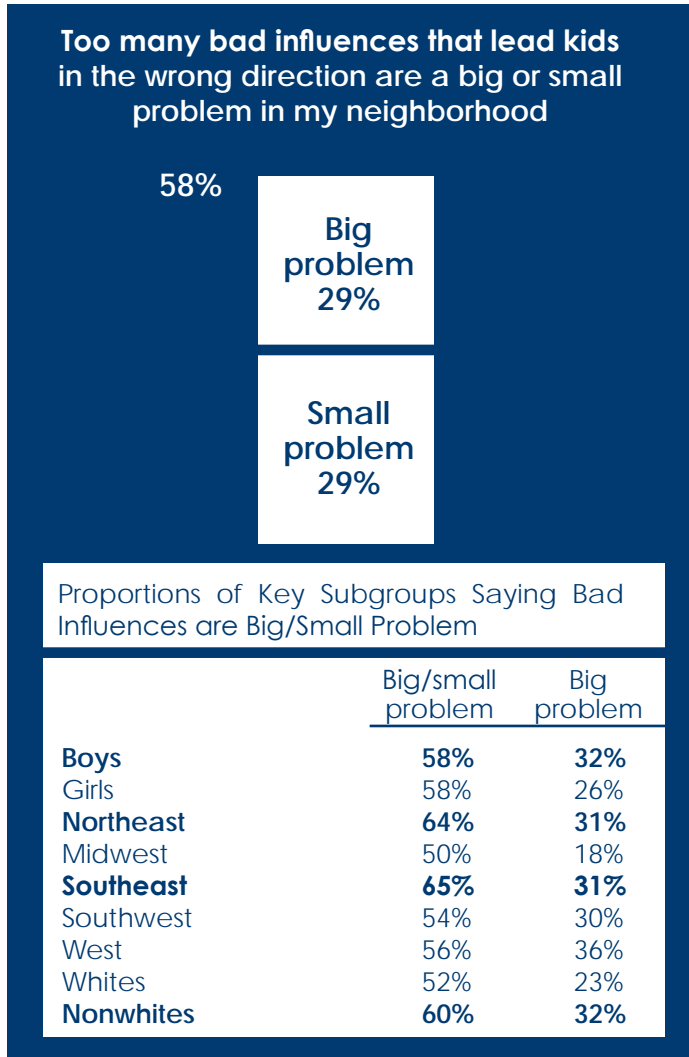
Despite their high self-confidence and an understanding of what it takes to become a successful and productive adult, Littles identified multiple barriers that stand between them and their goals.

### BAD INFLUENCES

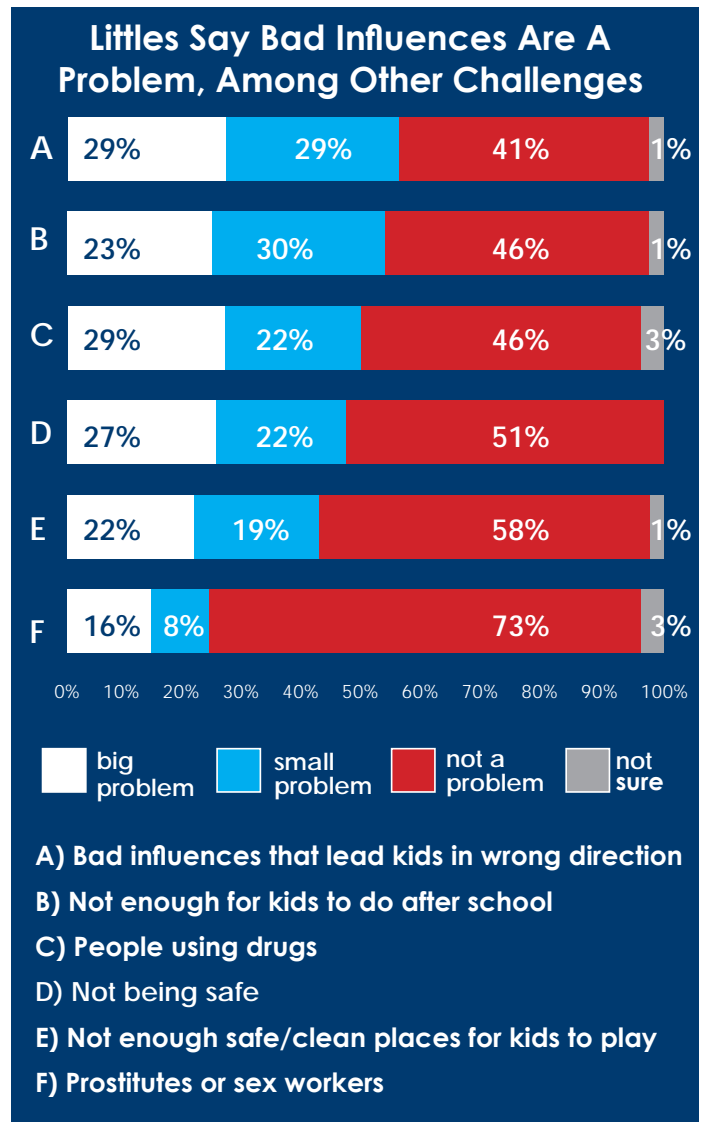
**Too many bad influences that lead kids in the wrong direction was identified as a top problem in Littles' neighborhoods**

Over half of Littles (58 percent) said that too many bad influences that lead kids in the wrong direction were challenges that they face in their neighborhoods. Nearly half (48 percent) said drugs and alcohol was the biggest challenge that children face when it comes to achieving their goals and accomplishing what they

want when they grow up. This was identified as a bigger challenge than attending schools that don't teach kids the things they need to know (23 percent), being poor (12 percent), or living in an unsafe neighborhood (9 percent). Half of Littles (51 percent) said that too many people using drugs was a problem in their neighborhood.



In our survey, white Littles were less likely than non-white Littles to say that too many people using drugs was a problem in their neighborhoods. Similarly, children who lived with both birth parents were less likely to say that bad influences were problems in their neighborhoods. Children who grow up in the presence of people who use drugs and alcohol or express attitudes favorable to them are at a greater risk of initiating drug use or criminal behavior themselves. Children who live in families that lack warmth and bonding and who lack bonds to other non-related adults that serve as positive role models are at an even greater risk. Minority children, particularly minority boys, are at the greatest risk of initiating these behaviors.<sup>25</sup>



For Littles in the focus groups, drugs, alcohol, and bad influences were barriers they navigate daily. One girl from Albuquerque said, “I live in an apartment complex and there are a lot of people in the complex that do drugs.” Another boy said that drugs are “so easy to get into and I know how tempting it is.”

## SCHOOL IS IRRELEVANT

### Schools don't teach kids what they need to know to succeed

Many Littles (23 percent) said the biggest challenge children face in achieving their goals is attending schools that do not teach them what they need to know, a challenge that came second only to drugs and alcohol. Children who live in the Northeast were less likely to say this was a concern than children living in other regions. Nearly one in three Littles (29 percent) said they never enjoy doing their homework. There

have been studies showing that students who do little or no homework each week are at an increased risk of dropping out.<sup>26</sup>

In our focus groups, many Littles expressed little enthusiasm for their schools and pointed out many problems with their learning environments. Their statements reflected the lack of resources their schools have, the notion that school is boring, and a lack of support from teachers. “My math teacher only does one problem a day and it doesn’t help,” one Little from Albuquerque said. “Some people can’t read in the ninth grade,” she continued. Another Little said, “I never have good days at school. There’s this algebra teacher that has it in for me.” Additionally, many Littles in the focus groups admitted that they rarely do their homework and, when they do, they only complete part of it.

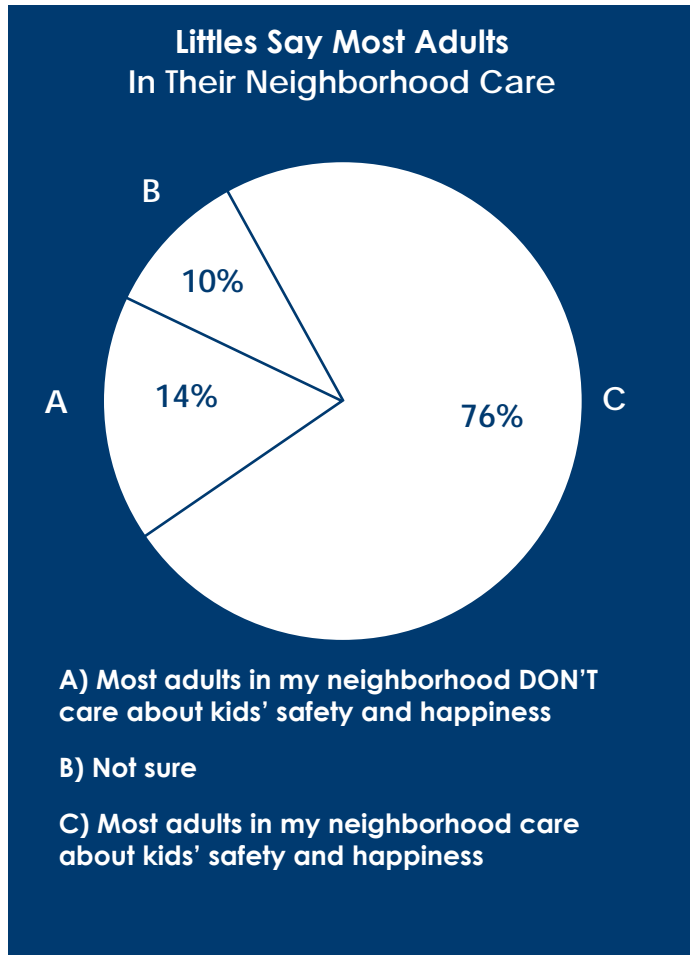
Attending low-performing schools has been found to increase the likelihood that children will begin engaging in risky behavior, such as drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, studies have found that the feeling that school is irrelevant is a significant factor in whether they decide to dropout.<sup>28</sup> Research asserts that children need to live in mentor-rich environments, those that are filled with formal as well as informal mentors, to succeed.<sup>29</sup>

## ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

### **Littles identify additional neighborhood challenges and concerns about their caretakers as additional barriers**

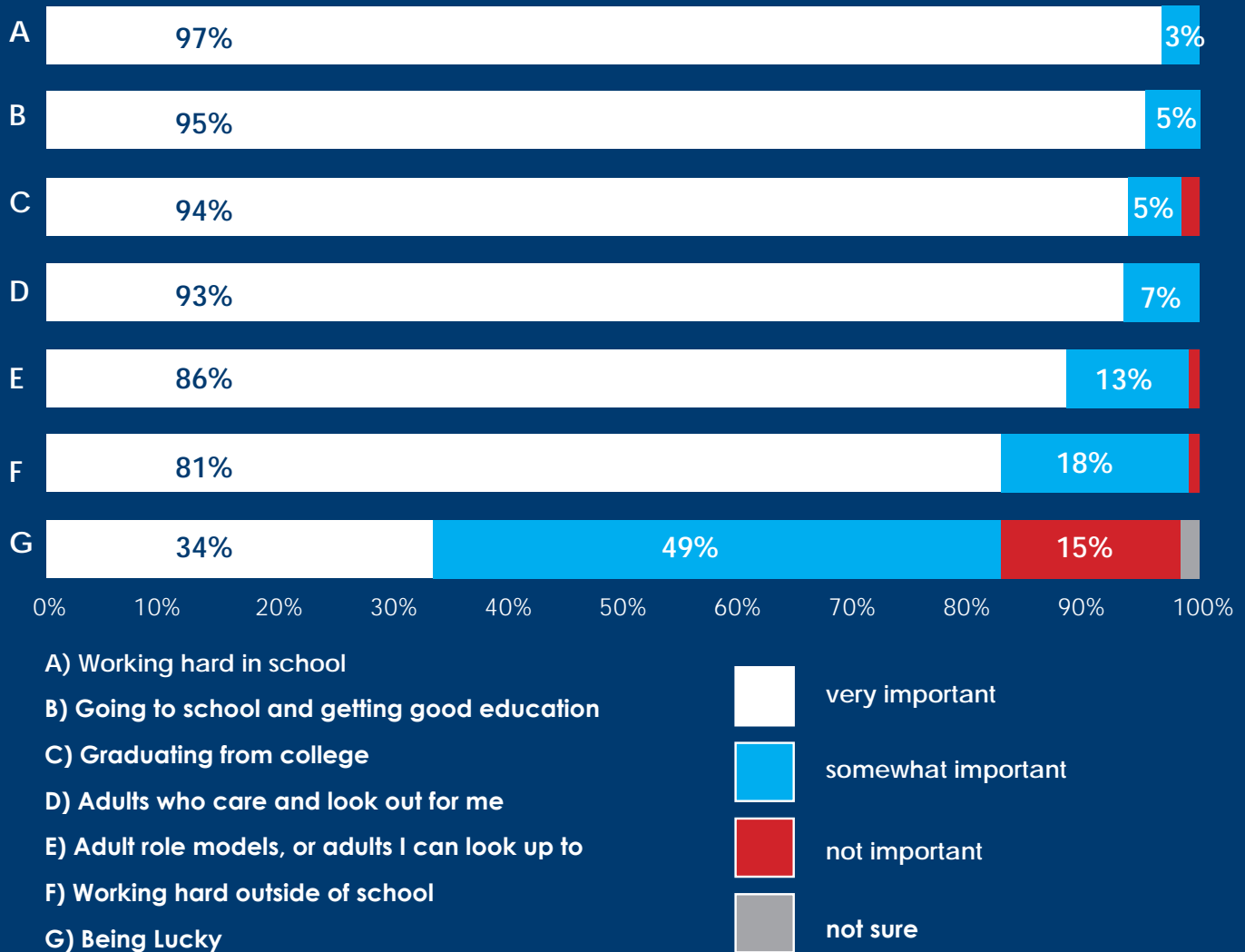
Although education and negative influences topped the list of their concerns, Littles also identified a number of problems they face on a daily basis. Half of Littles (53 percent) said that not having enough for kids to do after school was a problem in their neighborhood. One boy from Detroit said, “all we do is walk around and go to the gym or something because there’s nothing for us to do” in the neighborhood. Nearly as many (49 percent) identified not being safe as a problem they faced. Two out of five Littles (41 percent) said not having enough safe and clean places for kids to play was a problem in their neighborhood. Non-white Littles were more likely than white Littles to say that safety and not having enough to do after school were problems in their neighborhoods. Littles who were living with both birth parents were less likely to say that not being safe

was a problem in their neighborhoods. Despite these challenges, three out of four Littles (76 percent) said they believe that most adults in their neighborhoods care about children’s safety and happiness.



In the focus groups, Littles were open and honest about the additional challenges they face. Many Littles expressed worries about the health and safety of their parents and guardians. One Little said she was worried about her mother who has diabetes and who does not watch what she eats and must work long hours during the week and over the weekend. Another said that his mother had been drinking lately and he was worried about her becoming an alcoholic because his grandmother, who recently passed away, had been one. Yet another Little said that her mother has a drinking problem and stays out for days at a time. Some Littles worried about the emotional and financial security of their families.

## How important is each of these in your accomplishing what you want when you grow up?



One Little who said his father is a heroin addict worried about the financial situation of his family: “Our family is going through a lot right now, so I’m worried about not having enough money to get a decent home.” Many Littles also said they worried about the behaviors of their siblings, who participate in reckless behavior like smoking, drinking, and participating in gang activity. Although the content of their struggles varied from Little to Little, it is clear that these children suffer from a series of challenges that span impaired families to depleted schools.

## WHAT LITTLES THINK WILL HELP

### IMPROVED SCHOOLS

#### **Littles think individual attention, hands-on learning will improve schools**

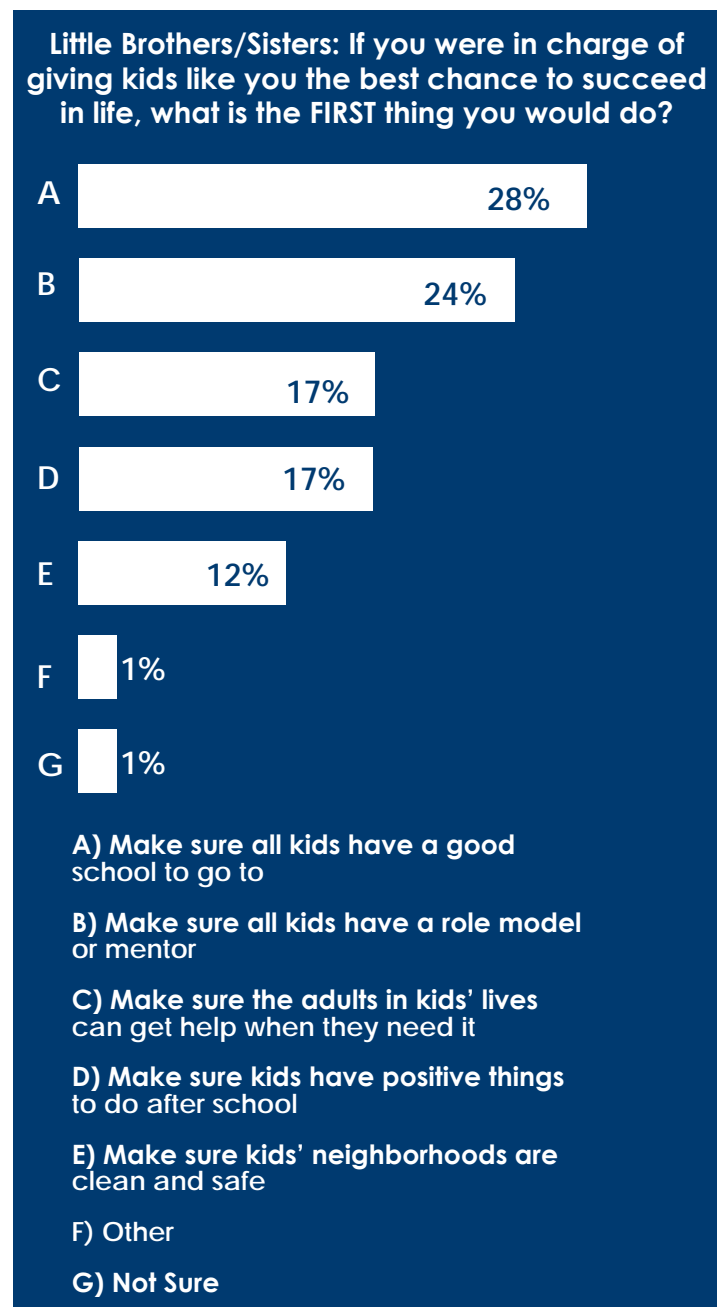
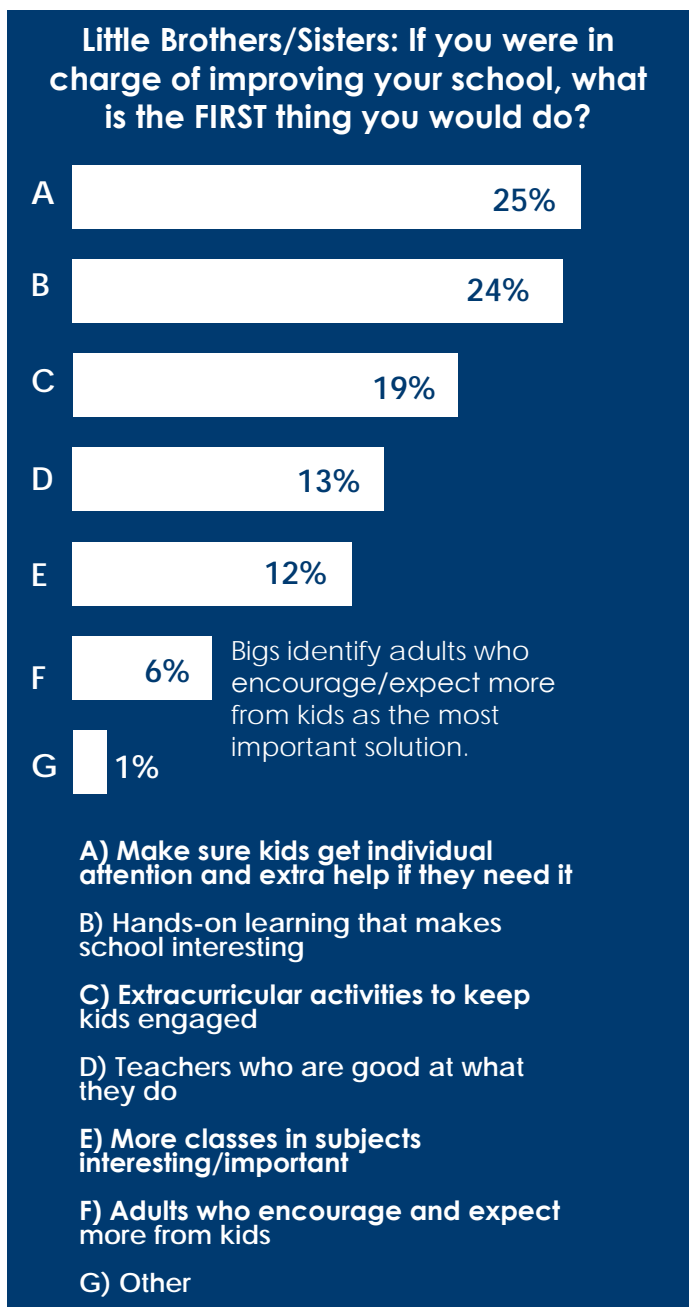
Nearly all Littles said that going to school and getting a good education (95 percent) in addition to graduating from college (94 percent) were very important to achieving their future goals. Nearly one in three Littles (28 percent) said, as their leading solution, that in order to give kids the best chance to succeed in life, they would make sure all kids have a good school to attend. This was identified by a plurality of Littles as the step they would take first to ensure that all kids have a better chance to succeed in life.

One in four Littles (25 percent) said that if they were in charge of improving their schools, they would make sure kids get individual attention and extra help if they needed it. Just as many (24 percent) said they would include hands-on learning that would make school interesting. One in five (19 percent) said they would offer more extracurricular activities to keep kids engaged in school. Comments from Littles in our focus groups aligned with the feelings expressed in the survey. One Little in our focus groups said that schools should have “electives that people are actually interested in that could help them with their future careers.” Another Little said that we should “make sure all the teachers are actually teaching and not just showing up.”

## MORE ROLE MODELS

### Littles think more role models will help them overcome barriers

Almost all of Littles (93 percent) said that having caring adults who care and look out for them and having adult role models they can look up to (86 percent) were very important to helping them achieve their goals later in life. One in four Littles (24 percent) said that making sure that all kids have a role model would give all kids the best chance to succeed, a change that came second only to making sure that all kids have a good school to which to go. Children 16 years old or older were more likely than younger children to say that they would make sure all kids have a mentor or role model



to ensure that they succeed.<sup>30</sup> Overall, most Littles (85 percent) said that they always enjoy spending time with their Big and nearly as many (80 percent) said they feel like their Bigs help them a lot.

When asked what they thought was the most important thing for kids to succeed, the plurality of children in the focus groups said that having an adult to push them to try their hardest would solve the other problems that govern their young lives. All the children said that having more adults play this role would improve their lives in the present and mitigate the problems they and their peers face in the long-term. Many of the Littles shared poignant stories about the impact their Bigs have had on their lives. One Little said, “My dad can’t do a lot of stuff with me, and we’re not like a son and dad are supposed to be, so my Big is there and it’s good.” Another Little said that he can talk to his Big Brother about anything. “He stays on me and makes sure I’m doing everything that I need to do,” he said. “It makes me feel like he cares about me,” he continued. In many cases, the stories Littles told indicate that Bigs provide a meaningful relationship where a parental relationship may not exist.

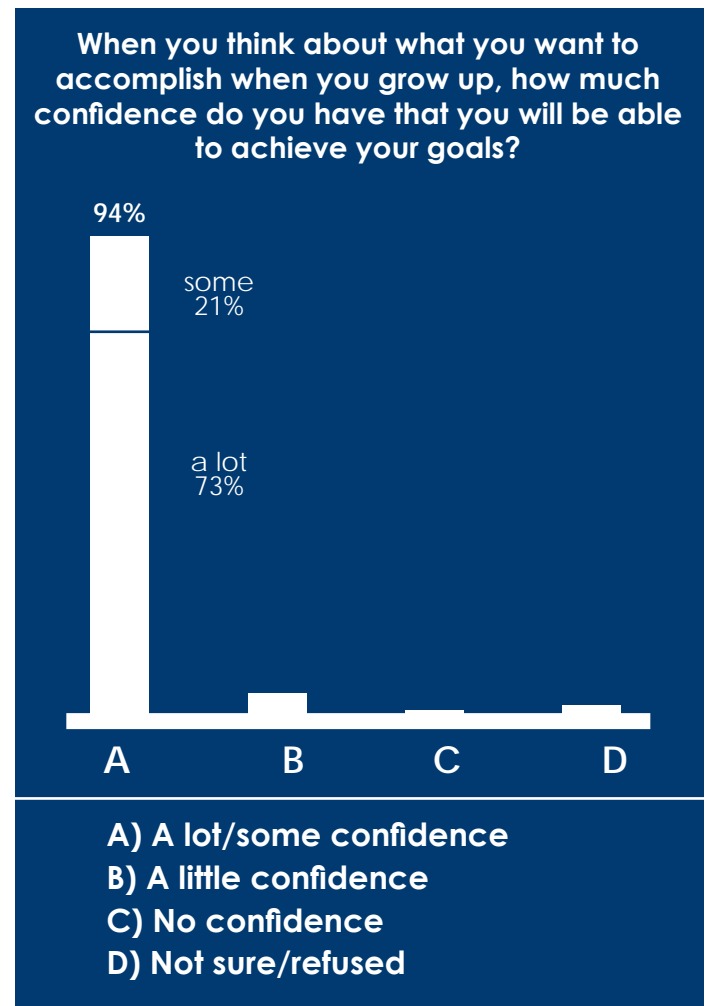
## LITTLES ARE CONFIDENT

### Despite barriers, Littles are very hopeful for their futures

Nearly all Littles (94 percent) said they had a lot or some confidence that they can achieve their future goals. Littles were also aware of what it takes to achieve their goals. Nearly all Littles said that working hard in school (97 percent), going to school and getting a good education (95 percent), and graduating from college (94 percent) were very important steps in order to achieve their goals later in life. Additionally, four out of five Littles (81 percent) said that working hard outside of school was also very important to enabling them to achieve their future goals. By contrast, only one out of three Littles (34 percent) said that being lucky was very important to helping them achieve their goals.

In spite of the challenges they face, Littles did not limit the aspirations they have for themselves. In our focus groups, Littles dreamed big. They said they wanted to be everything from firefighters, doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and veterinarians to Marines, musicians, and actresses. Although Littles said that working hard in school and pursuing post-secondary education was

an integral part of becoming successful adults, as discussed above, few Littles expressed an interest in their current education.



## THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF BIGS

Our survey also found that the “Big” experience profoundly changes the volunteers’ perspectives on the lives of at-risk youth. Like Littles, Bigs agree that education and negative influences are primary barriers to success. They also agree that improved schools and more role models would do the most to help. Bigs overwhelmingly support a Big Brothers Big Sisters advocacy effort:

**73%** of Bigs said that more kids having access to positive role models, like coaches and teachers;

**69%** said more kids having access to positive role models like Bigs; and

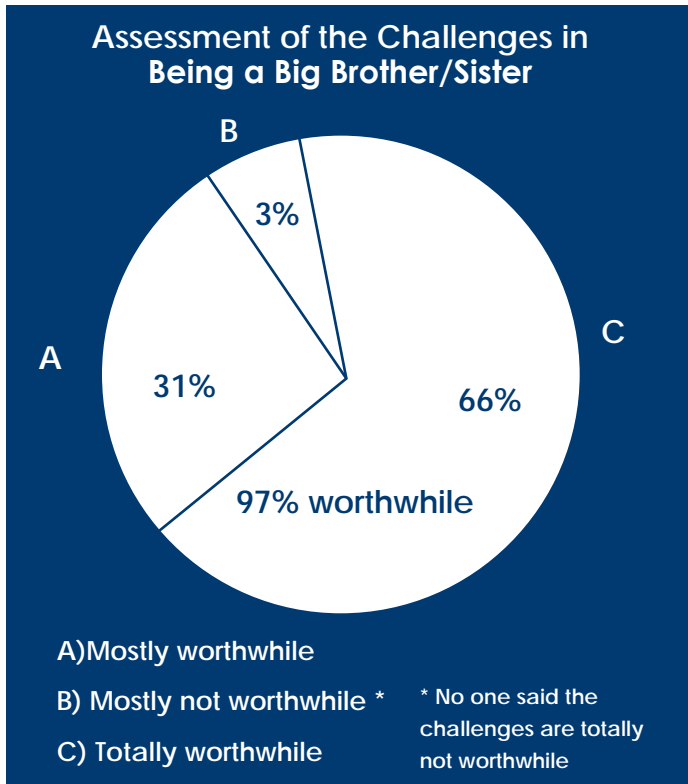
**54%** said improving the overall quality of schools would all significantly help at-risk youth succeed



69% of Bigs already view themselves as champions for children

76% of Bigs strongly support a Big Brothers Big Sisters advocacy effort for all kids

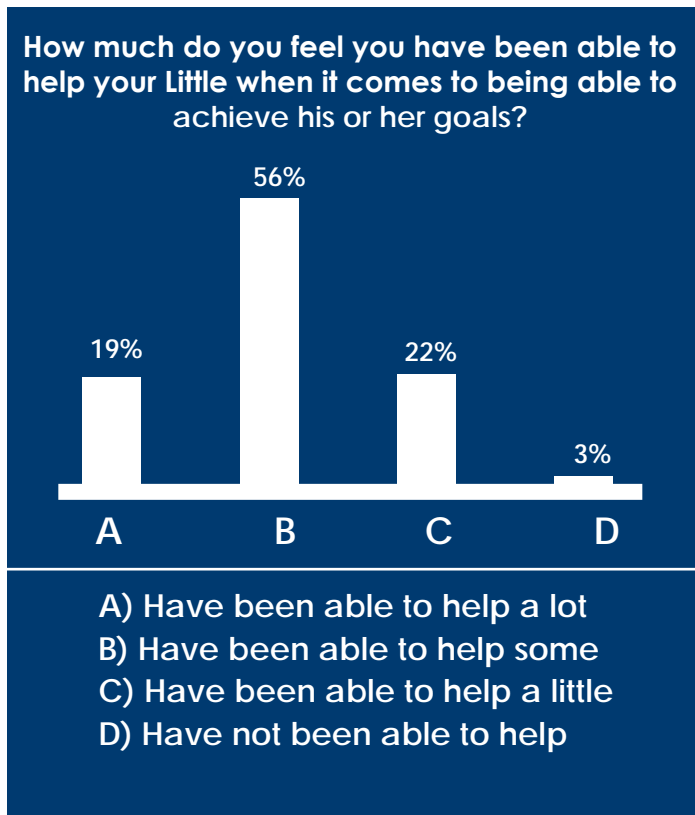
78% favor directly helping children, while only 22% think it is more important to change public policy that affects children



### BIGS AGREE WITH LITTLES ABOUT BARRIERS

**Bigs identified inadequate education and negative influences as their top concerns for Littles**

Over half of Bigs (56 percent) said that they worry that their Littles are not getting the education they will need to support themselves as adults. One in three Bigs (34 percent) said they worried their Littles would not complete their high school education. Some Bigs in our focus groups tapped into the lack of support from teachers that their Littles face. One Big said teachers don't take children seriously and added that her Little feels like the teacher "is just waiting for her to mess up." They also added that a lot of enrichment activities they remembered from being students, like taking trips to museums or enrolling in a music class, seemed to be missing from their Littles' educations.



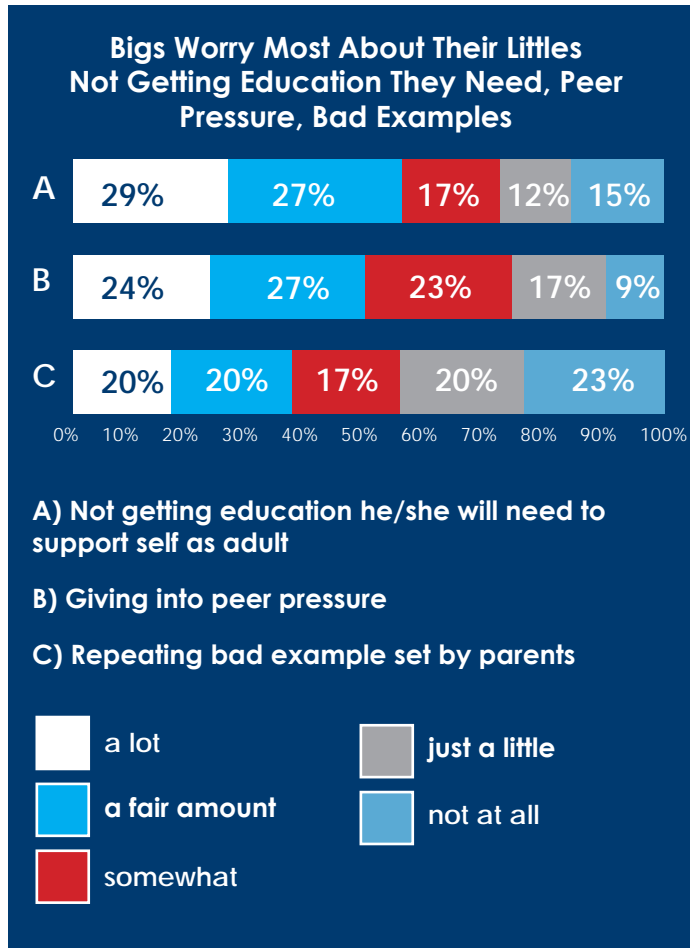
Additionally, half of Bigs (51 percent) said they were worried about their Littles succumbing to peer pressure. Many of them also said that repeating a bad example set by their parents (40 percent) or older siblings (27 percent) were concerns they had for their Little. Bigs also said that these barriers were large enough that they would stand between their Little and their future success. More than two out of five Bigs (44 percent) said adults in their lives who set negative examples could stand in the way of their Littles and their goals. Nearly as many (43 percent) said peer pressure could derail their Littles from achieving their goals. Although Bigs worried about inadequate education and negative influences, nearly half of Bigs (46 percent) said they worried that their Littles' lack of motivation or discipline would inhibit them from achieving their goals.

### TOUGH LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

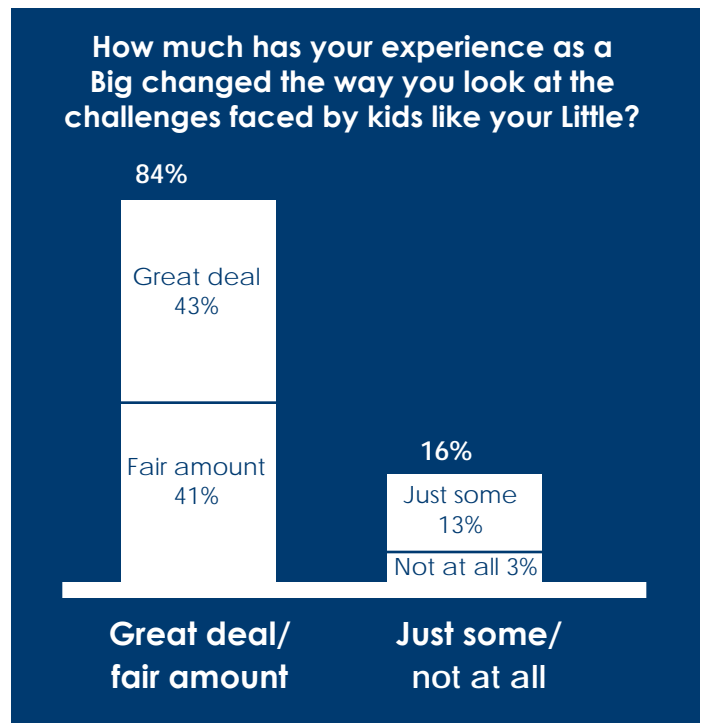
**Bigs said they were exposed to the difficult realities of their Littles' lives**

In our survey, Bigs identified many concerns that reflected the tough life circumstances that their Littles navigate daily. More than one out of three Bigs (37 percent) said that not having enough to do after school was a barrier to their Littles' future success. Three in 10 Bigs said that inappropriate living conditions (29

percent), poor quality schools (25 percent), living in an unsafe neighborhood (27 percent), not having enough safe places in which to play (25 percent), and family members involved in the legal system (25 percent) were very or fairly serious challenges that marked their Littles' lives. One in five (22 percent) said that adults in Littles' lives who abuse drugs or alcohol were barriers.



Bigs were candid during the focus groups about the challenges they had seen their Littles face. “They don’t even know if they’re going to have furniture next week,” one Big, speaking of his Littles, said. “For some of them, they don’t know day-to-day. You don’t know if there’s going to be a bullet flying through your window randomly.” Another Big said, “In the cases I’ve had, the houses are totally in shambles, so it gives me a totally different perspective in the sense of how tough it is to move forward when Dad’s not there and Mom’s just totally dysfunctional.” One Big put it simply: “Their environment sucks them into such bad things.”

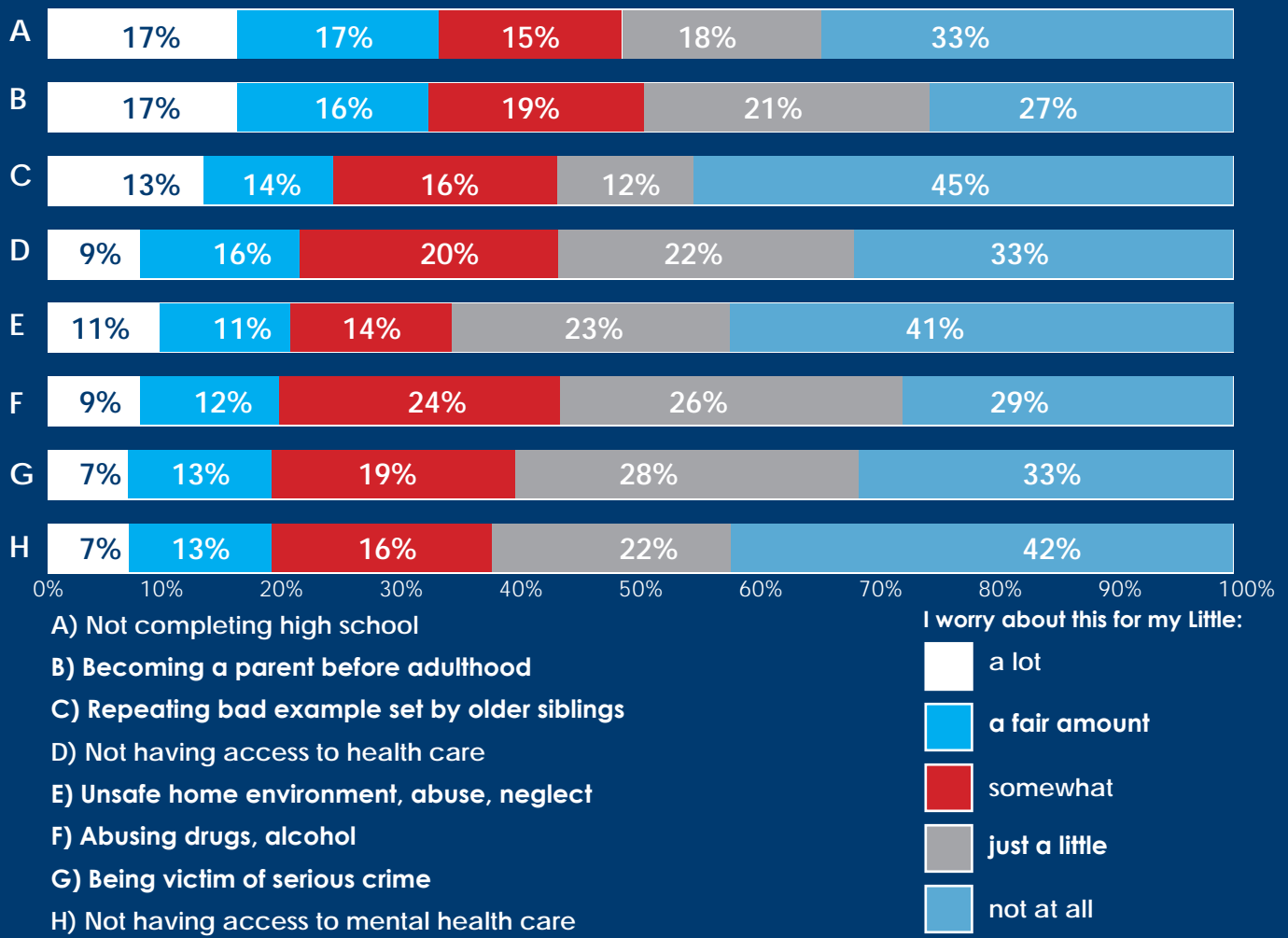


### WHAT BIGS THINK WILL HELP MOST Like Littles, Bigs think that better schools and more role models will do the most to help at-risk youth

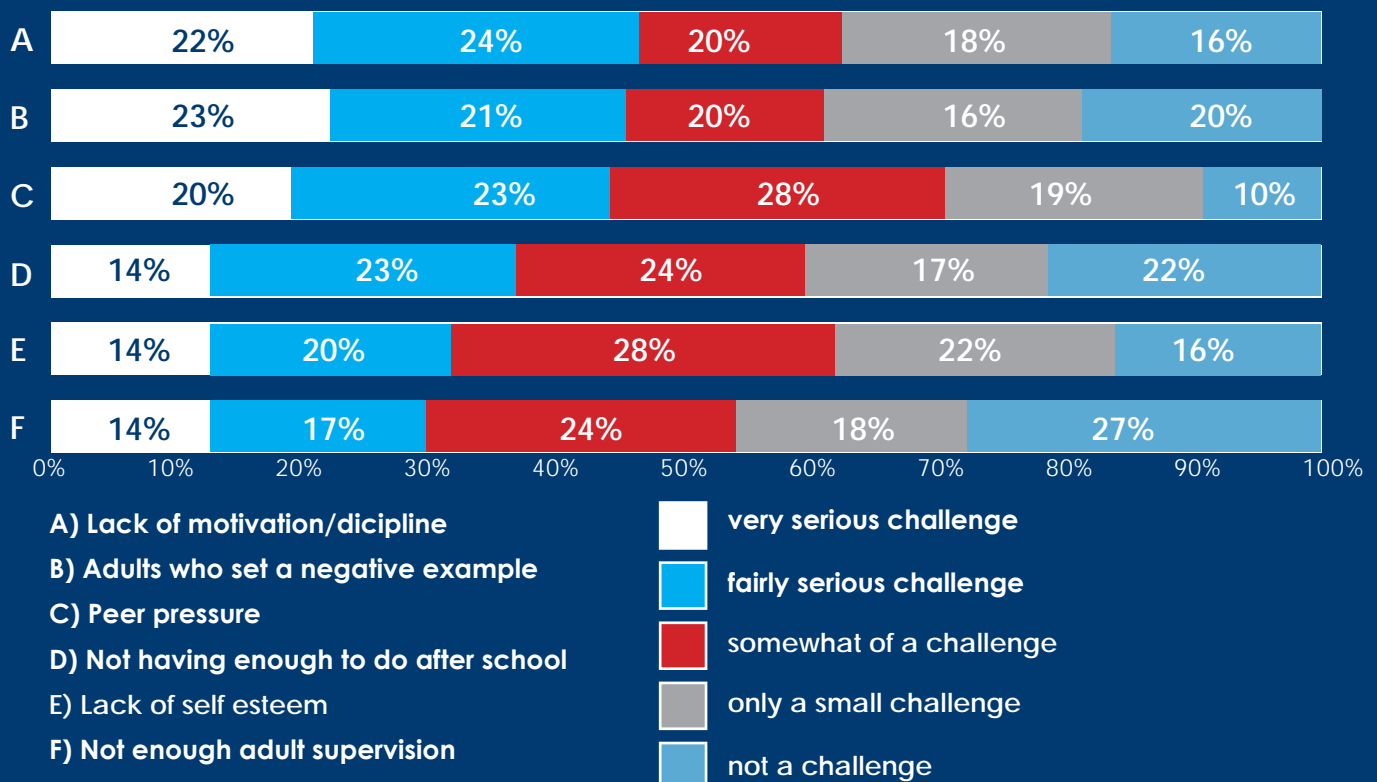
Seven out of 10 Bigs said that kids having more access to positive role models like coaches and teachers (73 percent) and role models like Bigs (69 percent) would improve children’s chances for success a lot. These feelings were reiterated in our focus groups. One Big said that mentoring is important for children living in tough circumstances because it can “help them have self worth and give them an outlet from what they’re involved in. To take them out of it for a minute and give them a chance to breathe. So they know that there’s hope and there’s something ahead of them.”

Half of Bigs said that making improvements in schools, like offering more after-school weekend activities (51 percent), making what kids learn more relevant (46 percent), and making an overall improvement in the quality of schools (54 percent) would significantly help their Little’s chance for success. One in three Bigs (34 percent) said that if they were in charge of improving their Little’s schools they would make sure all students have adults who encourage and expect more from them.

## Biggs Worry Most About Their Littles Not Getting Education They Need, Peer Pressure, Bad Examples (continued)



## How serious a challenge are these for your Little?



# BIGS SHARE INSIGHTS ON HOW TO HELP YOUTH

## A PROFOUND CHANGE

**Many Bigs shared insights on how their matches have affected them**

More than four out of five Bigs (84 percent) said their experience has changed the way they look at the challenges that at-risk youth face a great deal or a fair amount. Four out of five Bigs (82 percent) said their experience as a Big leaves them feeling like they wish they could do more to help their Littles and children like them. Many Bigs in our focus groups said that this feeling was partially spurred by the realization of just how tough the lives of their Littles are. Bigs in our focus groups shared countless stories about their Littles that deeply affected them. “The first impact is that I was sad,” said one Albuquerque Big. My Little “was in a pretty bad situation and I couldn’t help...even now I wonder if she’s okay.” She went on to say that the Big experience has left them feeling like they cannot do enough to change the tough circumstances that their Little faces. “I think a lot of people go into this thinking,

‘I’m going to fix this,’ and you can’t,” she said. “You just have to be their friend.” Another Big summed up his experience by saying, “What I’ve learned the most is how hard it is for these kids to go from point A to point B, point B being a good citizen.”

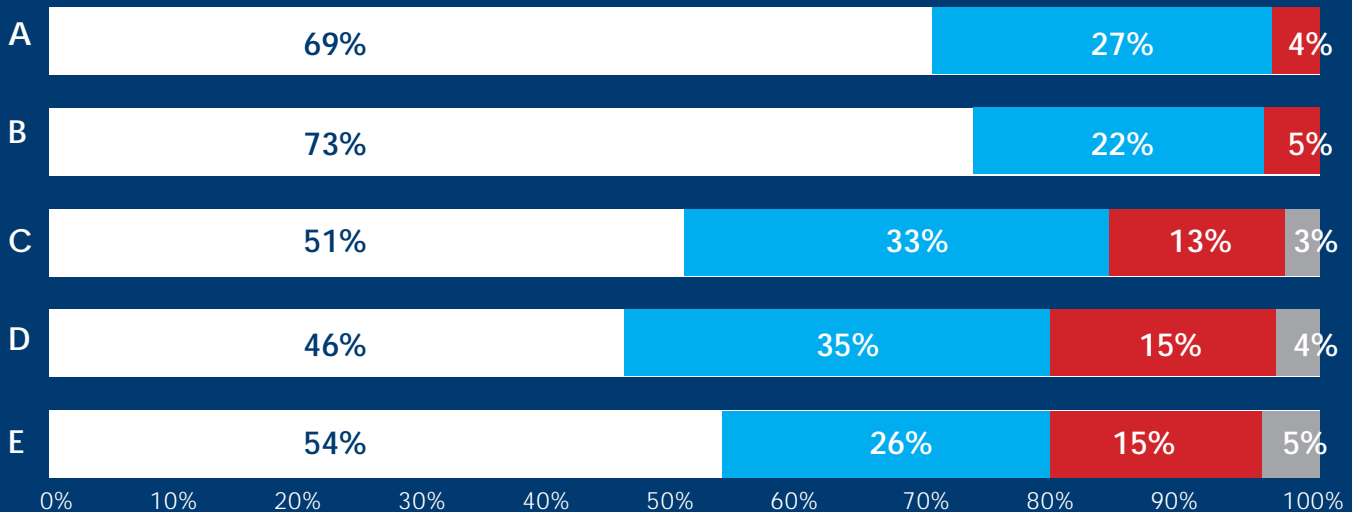
In our survey, only one out of five Bigs (19 percent) said that they feel like they have been able to help their Little a lot when it comes to achieving their goals. Out of the top barriers identified by Littles, none varied in significance based on how long they had been matched with their Big. As one Big from our focus groups put it rather succinctly: “We’re like band-aids.”

## CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN

**Most Bigs want to get involved on the local level on behalf of children**

Seven in 10 Bigs (69 percent) said that they already think of themselves as “champions for children.” As such, respondents said they would definitely or consider helping encourage more adults to help disadvantaged children in some way (44 percent), advocating for change that would help give all kids a better chance for success (41 percent), sending an email to an elected

### Bigs Say Positive Role Models Would Help The Most



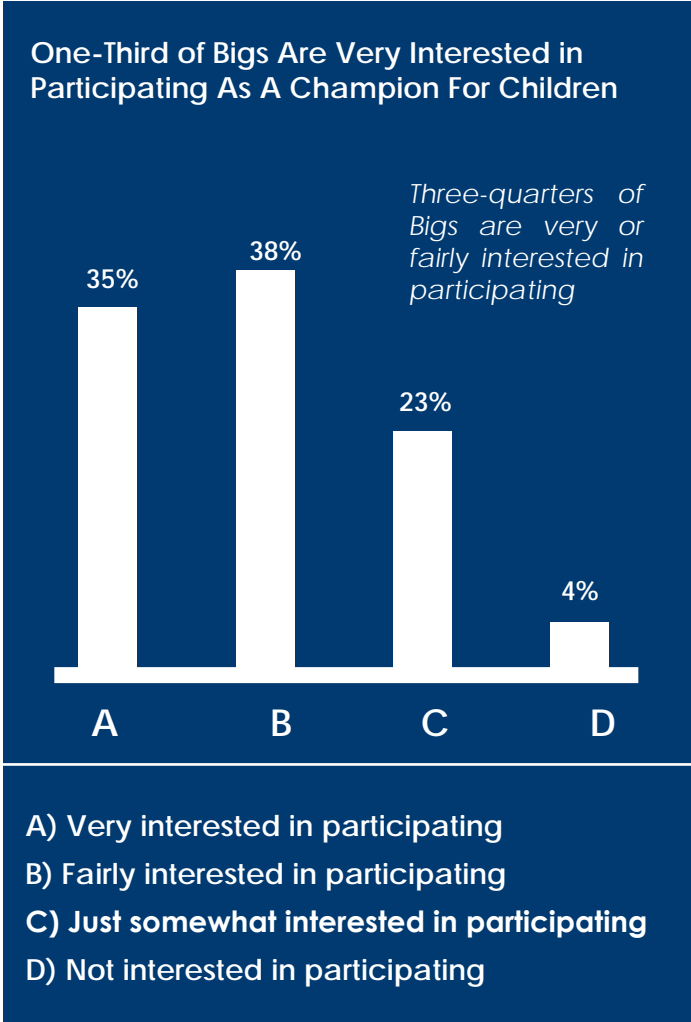
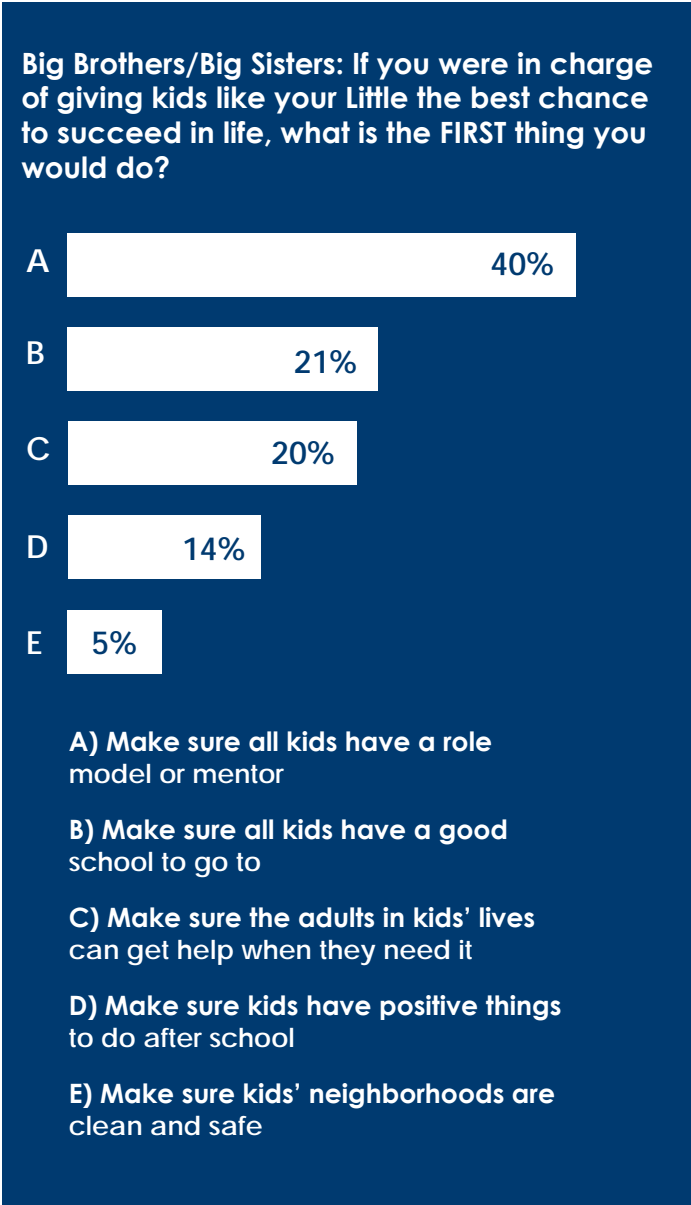
- A) More kids having access to positive role models like Bigs
- B) More positive role models in kids' lives, such as coaches, teachers
- C) More after-school/weekend activities available to kids
- D) Making what kids learn in school more relevant
- E) Improving the quality of public schools

This would improve my Little's chance of success



official about an issue that is important to children’s chances for success (35 percent), and making a financial donation to Big Brothers Big Sisters (15 percent), among other actions. Four out of five (82 percent) believe that Bigs working together can make a very significant or significant impact. “I’ve always had the belief that your community...is only as good as the weakest link,” one Big said. “So I always thought I could strengthen my community by giving back.” Three out of four (73 percent) said they would be either very interested or fairly interested in an engagement and advocacy strategy. For most Bigs, an engagement and advocacy strategy would be implemented at the local level. One Big said, “Why go to the government? This country isn’t designed for that. It’s about all of us volunteering and making it a better place.”

More than three out of four Bigs (78 percent) said that encouraging other individuals to become more involved in directly helping children was more important than working to change public policy. To that end, three out of five Bigs (62 percent) felt that encouraging business, religious, and other community leaders to get more involved and nearly as many (61 percent) said that encouraging other people like themselves to get involved should be primary goals of an advocacy campaign by Big Brothers Big Sisters. The same Big continued, “So I think you go to your community and say ‘Come on, step up.’” However, while Bigs were more interested in being engaged on the local level, nearly all Bigs (95 percent) supported the notion of the organization as a whole advocating on behalf of all children. Nearly as many (82 percent) asserted that advocating for all children was a continuation of the organization’s mission. As one Big in our Detroit focus group put it, “A national voice could make a big difference. There’s definitely an advantage to having a big voice.”





# WHAT BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS CAN DO

We believe the stories, insights, and reflections from our survey of Littles and Bigs and focus groups can add a new, personal, and desperately needed element to the discussion around at-risk youth and the various challenges they face. We offer ideas for actions Big Brothers Big Sisters can take that relate to what Littles, and the Bigs with whom they have relationships, believe can help them weather the tough conditions of their lives. We fundamentally believe that Big Brothers Big Sisters should, first and foremost, stay focused on its core mission of expanding best practices mentoring. That said, we hope this report will lay the foundation for the organization to better aid the children it currently serves and other at-risk children. We hope it will galvanize the organization's local executive directors, staff members, and volunteers to do the same.

## IN THE NATION: ADVOCACY AND RESEARCH

### EXPAND CORE MISSION OF BEST-PRACTICES MENTORING

In our survey, Littles and Bigs overwhelmingly reinforced the core mission of Big Brothers Big Sisters: to continue to expand the number of mentors for at-risk youth. In the focus groups, Littles consistently asserted that their Bigs served as a nurturing, caring presence and strong role models in their lives where others had been hampered, either due to prolonged absence or substance abuse. Similarly, Littles said their Bigs made a tangible difference in their lives, a feeling that was shared by Bigs and echoed in the survey results. Thus it is only natural that Big Brothers Big Sisters should continue to keep the quality of their mentoring relationships high throughout the federation and expand mentoring opportunities to much needed areas. To create new momentum and funding support for mentoring, Big Brothers Big Sisters should set another goal to expand the number of children reached by a caring adult mentor within a period of time. Given the success of best practices mentoring, Big Brothers Big Sisters should view any other engagement and advocacy strategies through this lens and determine whether such strategies advance its core mission.

### FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS

While mentoring has many allies who are fervent about the practice without having a substantial knowledge of the process, there are many leaders in the Congress and among our nation's governors, state legislators, and mayors who are strong and knowledgeable proponents

“ Littles consistently asserted that their Bigs served as a nurturing, caring presence and strong role models in their lives ”

of mentoring. Big Brothers Big Sisters should identify and call on these champions to place mentoring high on the public agenda and advocate for support at the national, state, and local levels. These officials can speak to the position of Big Brothers Big Sisters as a results-driven and evidence-backed organization that makes a difference in our communities and in the lives of our children.

#### CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN NETWORK

Big Brothers Big Sisters has a powerful alliance in its relationships with national organizations, such as the America's Promise Alliance, U.S. Department of Education, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Big Brothers Big Sisters should leverage these partnerships to enhance and implement effective solutions to the problems that plague our nation's children at the national, state, and local levels, focusing on the issues that Bigs and Littles identified, such as high school and college graduation, reduction of drug and alcohol abuse, and positive role modeling in safe neighborhoods. Big Brothers Big Sisters should identify organizations not already part of the America's Promise Alliance and link them together into a subgroup of the alliance which will coordinate for communications purposes, mobilize and direct potential volunteers, and enlist donors to help.

#### NATIONAL REPORT CARD

Because there is little data conducted about the status of children in our nation, they have fallen off the radar, prompting some to mistakenly believe that children are doing better when compared to other demographics. Aside from the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics and the annual reports issued by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, there is little comprehensive data that informs the American public and our public officials to the challenges and barriers children ages 0 to 18 are facing, how they fare year-to-year, and in which areas our nation is failing them. In coordination with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the champions for children network should issue a national report card every year that provides a baseline, measures the extent of the children's population that needs special help, and charts progress, including for mentoring and the goal Big Brothers Big Sisters has set to expand it. The report card will identify

especially heartening or troubling trends, gauge public and private investments in positive youth development supports, and issue a "grade." It is important that in this era of increased responsibility and accountability that we hold our nation, states, and communities accountable for the outcomes of our children. Not only will today's children be tomorrow's leaders, but how our children are developing today will determine whether the United States will be able to compete in the global economy tomorrow.

#### ONLINE NETWORK OF ALUMNI BIGS AND LITTLES AND VOLUNTEERS

Big Brothers Big Sisters' most powerful ally lies in its voluminous number of current and former Bigs and Littles. Bigs and Littles are the people who can speak to the impact of mentoring most effectively and are best poised to highlight these impacts to elected officials and private funders. They can also educate policymakers and other leaders on the challenges young people face. To ensure that Big Brothers Big Sisters can take advantage of these relationships, the national office should create an online network to keep these constituents engaged long after their mentoring relationships have ended that would: 1) enable current and former Bigs and Littles to share their success stories of how mentoring made a difference in their lives; 2) inform the network of pending budgets and legislation that will require action or supports; and 3) enlist alumni to attract other funding partners from the private sector.

#### COMMISSION FUTURE RESEARCH

While the effects of mentoring have been reinforced by powerful anecdotes, the biggest barrier to the mentoring field today lies in the realm of research. There is still a relatively small base of evidence for quality mentoring programs and few organizations, with the noted exception of Big Brothers Big Sisters, have submitted themselves to social scientific research. Even the landmark Public/Private Ventures impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters' community-based programs has not had a comprehensive follow-up. Most significantly, little research has focused on the process by which mentoring affects development outcomes and precisely through which causal mechanisms it works.<sup>31</sup> This ambiguity means that the research cannot tell us if mentoring is responsible for certain outcomes or whether the

youth who benefit the most are those who are better adjusted. Additionally, most mentoring relationship measures rely on a global index and do not pay rigorous attention to different outcomes as they relate to varying contextual and demographic backgrounds of youth.<sup>32</sup> Yet another limit of the existing body of research is that it sheds little light on the dynamics and vulnerabilities that could jeopardize the mentor/mentee bond.<sup>33</sup>

Big Brothers Big Sisters, in conjunction with the champions for children network, should commission research that:

- Sheds light on the dynamics of the mentor/mentee bond by focusing on social-emotional, cognitive, and identity processes;

- Explores what processes aid and hinder the mentor/mentee relationship;

- Explores whether mentoring has effects on youth directly or whether the impacts on youth are mediated through the mentee's improved relationship with guardians;

- Pays rigorous attention to which groups of children benefit from mentoring and where the differences fall along racial/ethnic, gender, and age lines; and

- Employs more statistically rigorous methodology, such as longitudinal studies that track the same cohorts of children throughout time.

This research will support current program practices, expose the ways in which mentoring relationships support positive youth development, reveal the dynamics of the mentor/mentee relationship to reduce the premature ending of relationships that could be detrimental to youth, and provide information that should be used to revise or supplement the program model. This research would not only inform best-practices mentoring, but would also solidify the mentoring field as reputable, results-driven, and evidence-based and would strengthen national, state, and local advocacy efforts.

## FOSTER A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

In an address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama called on all Americans to pursue some form of education beyond high school, and he challenged

the nation to once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. "Those who out-teach us today," he said, "will out-compete us tomorrow." Nearly all Littles said that graduating from college was a fundamental component of their future success. Given the most powerful and highly leveraged way to address inequality is to ensure students have a meaningful post-secondary degree, whether that be from a two-year or four-year institution, the national Big Brothers Big Sisters office should lead the charge for the network in emphasizing the importance of not only obtaining a high school degree, but obtaining a post-secondary degree as well. This focus should also be an important pillar in the training of Bigs. In addition to fostering a college-going culture among Littles and other at-risk children, local agencies should partner with reputable and results-oriented organizations that take concrete steps to prepare children to apply to college, access financial aid, and provide them with the tools and requisite knowledge to succeed once they get there. To that end, Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies should partner with the Boys & Girls Clubs' network of college readiness programs—in addition to other youth organizations engaging in this work—many of which meet with students over several years, beginning in middle school and running through high school graduation, offer tutoring and college preparatory courses and guidance on writing successful college entrance essays, promote the development of organization and study skills, and take students to career fairs and college trips, among other services. These programs already exist throughout the country, from Burlington, VT and San Francisco to Chicago and Chattanooga, TN. Where these programs do not exist, Big Brothers Big Sisters should play an active role in establishing them. Taking these steps will help lay the foundation for prosperity not only for Littles and other at-risk children, but for our nation as a whole.

## IN STATES

### ROBUST STATE ASSOCIATIONS

Local agencies that are strapped for financial and human resources suffer the most when their partner agencies lack robust coordination on the state level that would enable them to effectively tap into funding for mentoring. The national office should inform local agencies on the steps needed to form state associations and facilitate these efforts where possible



and necessary. They should also share their strategies for fundraising for paid advocates with states that want to start or enhance their own associations. Stories from already existing state associations that have established standards and have been successful at garnering funds at the state level should be shared. For example, the State Associations of Texas and Florida have been successful at garnering millions of dollars at the state level that can be funneled down to their local agencies. Robust state associations will be critical to guiding local agencies on their advocacy efforts. Indeed, strong state associations should share their best practices for advocating for funding, such as enlisting Bigs and Littles to write speeches and deliver speeches to the state legislature and annual advocacy days with local agencies.

## STATE ALLIANCES

State associations should collaborate with other groups at the state level that focus on youth development and advocate for policies beneficial to children, such as CHIP expansion, raising the compulsory school age, or school reform. If such alliances already exist, Big Brothers Big Sisters should play an active leadership role in them. This state-based engagement and advocacy will reaffirm Big Brothers Big Sisters' role as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve schools, reduce violence, and strengthen families and communities. One executive director noted that these alliances would be critical to painting a picture of Big Brothers Big Sisters as a true social investment in children. Without it, he worried the organization would not be included in serious pro-active planning discussions to help youth:

They don't bring us to the table during the planning process. It's after the fact. Imagine a pie on the table in a group of folks that are addressing problems with schools: we're going to bring in TFA kids, we're going to raise the education standards, we're going to be more punitive with our teachers and administrators, but there's no investment in youth. They cut up the pie and then sweep the crumbs onto the floor and leave organizations like ours to pick up what we can. That to me has to be one of the key goals of advocacy on the part of Big Brothers Big Sisters: it's to change the conversation.

These alliances would be best positioned to collectively advocate for changes in policies and for funding. Indeed, Big Brothers Big Sisters should go beyond merely partnering with organizations to collectively bargaining with them on behalf of children. Similarly, so long as such positions would in no way inhibit local agencies from garnering financial support, the president of the state association should serve on different committees within the local government, such as on special committees to the city council, to ensure that Big Brothers Big Sisters is an active advocate for all children who need support.

## IN AGENCIES AND COMMUNITIES

### CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN NETWORKS

Bigs in our survey said they felt like they had not been able to help their Littles significantly in achieving their future goals and that their experience with the organization has left them feeling like they want to do more to help at-risk youth. They also have a desire to work side-by-side with other Bigs in local communities to make a substantial difference in the lives of children who are the most in need of support. As one Big said, speaking of the untapped potential of children, we could have “a voice that says how important they are to society and that being able to help them is more beneficial to society than people realize.” With nearly a quarter-million active Bigs, and countless other alumni Bigs, Big Brothers Big Sisters is poised to tap into a large group of willing and able volunteers and put them to work in the service of children throughout the country. Additionally, our research shows that minority Bigs are more likely to say they want to be involved in a Big Brothers Big Sisters program that would engage them as champions for children. Local agencies should continue to target and actively recruit minorities, through churches and other community organizations, for both mentoring and other volunteer opportunities.

A Big Brothers Big Sisters-sanctioned champions for children network would enable experienced Bigs—those who have been a mentor for at least a year—to work side-by-side while also engaging other local leaders, including school board members, city councilors, corporate executives, veterans, and

religious leaders, to work on projects to improve the lives of children at-risk of not reaching their goals. These projects would be geared toward combating the problems that affect all children, like the high school dropout crisis, and would respond to the disparate needs of what Littles identify as problems in their communities throughout the Big Brothers Big Sisters federation. Bigs could serve as a critical link between elected officials and the communities they represent; for instance, Bigs could invite caseworkers from local Congressional offices to meet with groups of Bigs, Littles, and their families to talk about community resources that would improve the life chances of at-risk youth. In any case, these projects would respond to the challenges and barriers that Littles and Bigs identify for their communities and what they think would help, from cleaning up a neighborhood park in the Southeast to providing transportation for Littles to travel between school and community centers in the West. To that end, three or four Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies should convene Bigs to discuss what they think a local engagement and advocacy strategy should look like. This information should be used to inform the creation of these champions for children networks throughout the federation. These pilots would gather information on what their constituents identify as the most pressing needs and concerns in their communities as part of the orientation and training process for the match team.

Additionally, because delivering high-quality mentoring should remain the primary focus of Big Brothers Big Sisters, local agencies should identify and partner with other strong, best-practices local organizations that have the infrastructure to support more volunteers for these efforts. These partners could be local schools that enlist Bigs to serve as assistant coaches for sports teams or community centers that need more volunteers for special weekend events. Whatever each network decides is a pressing concern in their community, goals should be set for each network—for example, tangible declines in teenage drug abuse, building playgrounds to replace unsafe and unclean public spaces, and local reports showing accountability for results.

## INNOVATION COUNCILS FOR YOUTH

While research tells us much about the various supports that children need to thrive, it is important that we are ever searching for innovative solutions to provide children with challenging and engaging learning activities and ensure physical safety in their

neighborhoods, among the other supports they so desperately need. To that end, Innovation Councils for Youth should be formed. These councils would be composed of local Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies and other local best-practices organizations that specialize in each of the critical youth development support categories: adequate nutrition, health, and shelter; multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers; challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences; meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership; physical and emotional safety and health; and emotionally and financially stable home environments. If these councils already exist in a given community, Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies should join them and take an active leadership role in them. These organizations will engage children in after-school activities and provide families with much needed support.

While forming these councils, the national office should look to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee, which is part of an America's Promise designated Promise Place. That agency is one branch of the Youth Opportunity Center, a coalition of several youth-serving organizations that provide supports in each of the crucial areas for positive youth development. Other partners include the Oasis Center, which provides counseling and support for families, S.T.A.R.S., which offers support to young people who are dealing with substance abuse and violence, and Metro Nashville Public Schools. "If you could imagine a filter through which at-risk youth pass through, in an effort to make sure that none are left behind, we're like the first filter and the other folks here are more intervention and treatment related," said Lowell Perry, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee. "So at the end of the day, if you come in this building, we like to say that there is no wrong door for youth." These efforts should be replicated and brought to scale. The national office should highlight this innovation council and others present in the federation for their network and share information on what services they provide, how they provide them, and how they work together.

Local innovations that are making significant strides could potentially be shared with the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation. This would ensure both the dissemination of high-impact solutions throughout the federation, but would also open up opportunities for federal and private

funding. As President Obama said about the Social Innovation Fund, instead of “wasting taxpayer money on programs that are obsolete or ineffective, government should be seeking out creative, results-oriented programs...and helping them replicate their efforts across America.” Big Brothers Big Sisters could lead the way in this call for innovative solutions that enable more youth to become successful adults.

## MENTORING AS A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

Many Bigs said they wanted to advocate for change that would give all kids a better chance for success. Although the majority of Bigs preferred encouraging other individuals to be more involved, a substantial number of Bigs said they would at least consider working to affect public policies at the local, state, and national levels. These Bigs and other interested Littles and local agency volunteer board members could advocate for mentoring funds in the context of a comprehensive strategy to change the conditions that give rise to barriers. These volunteers should be provided with training toolkits on positive youth development, the role of mentoring in making a difference in communities and children’s lives, and advocacy. Mentoring, as administered by Big Brothers Big Sisters, does not just provide youth with much needed relationships with non-parental adults, it also decreases the likelihood that children will initiate drug and alcohol use and engage in violent behavior. These facts, which are supported by impact studies, should be emphasized in all efforts to capture funding for the organization. As one Big Brothers Big Sisters employee solely dedicated to advocacy efforts asserted, “What we are doing is really good work and it does change lives and there’s evidence that supports it. We’re not a nice program, we’re an absolutely necessary program.”

The national office should highlight and disseminate stories of successful advocacy from local agencies to the rest of the federation, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of Seattle/Puget Sound’s success at capturing funding as part of an initiative to prevent youth violence and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Denver’s success at acquiring funds to serve homeless and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) eligible children. This dissemination of information would provide local agencies that are having trouble with advocacy with a model to effectively advocate for funds. It would also help them identify which actions, including undertaking a visibility campaign, arranging meetings and site visits with elected officials, and annual advocacy days, among others, will work the best for their agency. It will also help them identify special populations of children that could be served and provide them with insights on how best to serve them.



**“ a substantial number of Bigs said they would at least consider working to affect public policies at the local, state, and national levels ”**

## BIGS AS ADULT ADVOCATES

Although the majority of Bigs said they feel like they make a difference in their Little's life very or fairly often, few Bigs feel like they have been able to significantly help their Littles achieve their future goals. In our focus groups, Bigs said they wanted to do more to help their Littles. Enhanced relationships between Bigs and caseworkers would not only provide Bigs with additional information they need to help their individual Littles, but would also safeguard against Bigs becoming disillusioned with their role. This would ensure that fewer relationships result in early terminations that could be harmful to Littles. During initial training and orientation, Bigs should be trained on how they can become adult advocates for their Littles at school. Nearly all Littles said that graduating from high school and college were integral to achieving their future goals. That said, few expressed an interest in their current educations for a variety of reasons, ranging from a lack of support from teachers to the feeling that school is boring. Bigs agreed that education was an important component to future success but also worried that their Littles were not getting the education they needed to thrive later in life.

Every year, almost one-third of all public high school students—and nearly half of all blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans—drop out of high school.<sup>34</sup> While there has been some progress in recent years, we still have a far way to go. In their role as advocates, Bigs should connect their Littles with supports they need to help them stay on track to achieve in school and graduate with their class. On the match level, this advocacy could range from advocating for their Littles to take an art class as part of their curriculum to working with other Bigs at the school to arrange for more field trips without placing financial burdens on schools that are already strapped for resources and struggling to meet educational standards. In many states, the status of high schools is poor enough that progress must be made through sustained and robust partnerships that work to address the problems that plague our schools at individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels. To combat our nation's abysmal high school dropout rate, local Bigs should connect with the

America's Promise Alliance GradNation campaign, which highlight the voices of young people themselves to provide concrete steps to ameliorate the conditions that cause so many of them to leave high school before earning a degree.

## CONCLUSION

Frederick Douglass once proclaimed, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." It is imperative, for the health of our children and our nation, that we lift up their voices and take action. Far too many children live in homes with only one parent, far too many live below the federal poverty line, and far too few are able to capitalize on the promise of a good education that will enable them to be successful later in life. Beyond the moral imperative of taking action to improve their lives lies an economic one. Children who grow up in these conditions take a heavy toll on the nation in terms of increased social services, lost tax revenue and a diminished ability to compete effectively in a more demanding global economy, which mandates that children get not only a high school diploma, but a college one as well. The time is clearly right, perhaps even overdue, for a concerted effort to ensure that all children, especially those in the toughest circumstances, get all of the supports they need to be ushered into the ranks of productive adulthood and active citizenship.

For over a century, Big Brothers Big Sisters has provided the children who need it most with a nurturing and caring mentor. While research shows that this is an absolutely critical component of positive youth development, more can be done to expand best practices mentoring and provide all at-risk children with the supports they need to thrive. We believe that Big Brothers Big Sisters at the national, state, and local levels can engage volunteers to improve youth outcomes, launch a national advocacy effort, and continue to be evidence-based and results-oriented. We hope that the reflections, insights, and stories shared in this report will help transform the way we view at-risk youth—not as problems that we must solve but as untapped potential to be unleashed.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND NOTE

The authors would like to give special thanks to Geoffrey Garin and Maeve Ward of Hart Research Associates, and Mary McNaught Yonkman and Molly Farren of Civic Enterprises for the creative and cooperative effort that led to this report. Civic Enterprises is a public policy development firm dedicated to informing discussions of issues of importance to the nation.

The authors, together with Hart Research Associates, would like to give thanks to the over 1,000 Bigs and Littles who shared their insights and reflections with courage and honesty.

The views reflected in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Big Brothers Big Sisters.



# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Hart Research Associates, Inc., conducted a three-part research program.

The first component was qualitative and included four focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted in Detroit, Michigan and two focus groups were conducted in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In each location, one group of recent or current Big Brothers and Big Sisters and one group of recent or current Little Brothers and Little Sisters were convened. Each session comprised seven to 11 participants. The Little Brothers and Little Sisters were between 12 and 15 years old.

The second and third components were quantitative.

A nationwide survey among 405 current or recent Little Brothers and Little Sisters age 12 and older, was conducted by telephone August 18-20, 2009

A nationwide survey among 597 current or recent Big Brothers and Big Sisters was conducted online August 21-31, 2009

# NOTES

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<sup>4</sup> The Federal Reserve System and the Brookings Institution (2007). *The enduring challenge of concentrated poverty in America: case studies from communities across the U.S.* Richmond: The Federal Reserve System and the Brookings Institution.

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