

# With Community Volunteers in the Classroom, Both Students and Teachers Get Support



—Getty

By Andrew Tuite

May 2, 2018

Juggling the demands of classroom instruction, standardized testing, and giving all students the individualized attention they need can feel impossible for even the most skilled of teachers. It can be a load that is hard to bear alone. As a former classroom teacher, I've experienced this stress myself. Now, as a public school principal, I've sought ways to alleviate burdens for my teachers and staff. Sometimes, what you need isn't better books or more time in the school day —it's another set of hands.

Few teachers, especially in public schools, are fortunate enough to have the resources for regular in-classroom support. Even fewer classrooms can regularly offer one-on-one time for struggling students who are at varying skill levels. It's not just about helping them meet grade-

level comprehension, but also about fostering excitement in core subject areas like math and reading.

There is an untapped resource ripe for creating this vision of a complete classroom: volunteer community members who can serve as academic mentors. Adding mentors to the classroom is a simple, logical, inexpensive way to assist teachers—and one that I believe is key to closing achievement, opportunity, and support gaps.

## Many Hands Make the Work Light

According to the National Mentoring Partnership, students who meet regularly with mentors are 54 percent less likely than their peers to skip a day of school<sup>[1]</sup> and 37 percent less likely to skip class. The consistent presence of a caring adult also motivates students socially and emotionally. At-risk students who regularly meet with a mentor are 46 percent less likely than their peers to start using drugs and 81 percent more likely to participate regularly in sports and extracurricular activities.

I have been lucky enough to see these effects firsthand. At Jackson Mann K-8 School in Boston, where I am the principal, we have about a dozen volunteer academic mentors who come in weekly. This is through our partnership with Boston Partners in Education<sup>[2]</sup>, a local nonprofit that recruits, trains, and screens volunteer community members to be mentors at no cost to schools. Each mentor is paired with a student or a small group who has been nominated by their teacher to receive personalized support.

Our mentors commit to at least an hour a week for an entire school year, working closely with the teacher to reinforce academic goals and build relationships with students. Teachers pre-plan lessons with mentors and give them a glimpse in advance of what content will be covered. These academic mentors don't replace the training and experience our teachers bring to the table, but help to complement daily instruction and develop students' academic and personal confidence. After all, it is teachers' connection to students—their insight and expertise—that allows them to identify who most needs an academic mentor.

Mentorships can be particularly helpful for students who are English-language learners. We have many English-language learners who struggle to connect socially. When we told the mentoring program about this need, they began sending mentors who spoke Arabic and Spanish to work with our students in their native languages. These student-mentor relationships became about much more than academics; they also provided a point in the day during which English learners could connect to adults without worrying about speaking a language other than the one most

familiar to them. It is a joy to watch these students grin from ear to ear when their mentors show up.

## A Beneficial Partnership

Mentoring programs are also a real boon to teachers in a variety of ways. It's not uncommon in our school for an academic mentor to stay with the same teacher for several years in a row.

Many of my teacher colleagues say how appreciative they are to have another dependable adult in the classroom who is professional and efficient. Teachers are then better able to manage their classroom and dedicate their attention to the larger group. Some mentors also put in extra effort to share updates on student progress and point out individual struggles the teacher may not have picked up on in class. This feedback has helped teachers create new learning opportunities or worksheets specifically catered to the skills students need to develop.

All across the country, there are Partners in Education and similar nonprofit organizations that do work with in-school mentorship—from Austin, Texas,<sup>[3]</sup> to Charleston, S.C.,<sup>[4]</sup> to Jackson, Miss., to Tulsa, Okla.,<sup>[5]</sup> to Indianapolis<sup>[6]</sup> and San Francisco,<sup>[7]</sup> just to name a few. It is up to us as educators to voice our need for this kind of assistance. Local communities need to know that we would benefit from support beyond pencils, papers, and books.

Through the added involvement of the community, students can develop critical skills, self-confidence, and the motivation they need to recognize and achieve their full potential. By opening our school doors, we can in turn open doors for students, creating classrooms that give them the full range of attention they deserve.

Andrew Tuite is the principal of Jackson Mann K-8 School in Allston, Mass.

Web Only

Related Stories

- “To Fill a 'Mentoring Gap,' Schools Get Creative,”<sup>[8]</sup> October 18, 2017.

**Notice:** We recently upgraded our comments. (Learn more here<sup>[9]</sup>.) If you are logged in as a subscriber or registered user and already have a Display Name on edweek.org, you can post comments. If you do not already have a Display Name, please create one here<sup>[10]</sup>.

## Ground Rules for Posting

We encourage lively debate, but please be respectful of others. Profanity and personal attacks are prohibited. By commenting, you are agreeing to abide by our user agreement.

All comments are public.

## Links

1. <http://www.mentoring.org/why-mentoring/mentoring-impact/>
2. <https://bostonpartners.org/>
3. <https://austinpartners.org/>
4. <https://readingpartners.org/location/south-carolina/>
5. <http://www.partnersinedtulsa.com/>
6. <http://www.warren.k12.in.us/partners-in-education>
7. <http://sfedfund.org/>
8. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/10/18/to-fill-a-mentoring-gap-schools-get.html>
9. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/how-to-comment-on-edweek-a-notice.html>
10. <https://myaccount.edweek.org/epe/main.pl?action=MyInfo>