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## High School Mentors In Brief:

*Findings from the Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study*

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By Linda Jucovy and Carla Herrera

With growing pressure to improve student performance, more and more schools are partnering with school-based mentoring (SBM) programs in the hope that they will help address the academic and social needs of their students. Hundreds of thousands of children already participate in SBM,<sup>1</sup> and the numbers are likely to grow. As budgets shrink during the current economic recession, school districts may be forced to increase class size. Children will receive less individual attention from their teachers<sup>2</sup>; as a result, there may be even more demand for supports such as SBM.

In SBM, mentors meet with students on the school campus, typically for one hour a week during or after school, to provide one-on-one friendship and support. The smaller time commitment and more structured setting of SBM have allowed programs to recruit adult volunteers who may be reluctant to commit to the greater demands of community-based mentoring. More recently, programs have also been reaching out to high school students to serve as mentors. This approach—often called cross-age peer mentoring<sup>3</sup>—is becoming increasingly popular. In 2008, approximately 40 percent of the 129,000 mentors in Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) SBM programs were high school students.<sup>4</sup>

These volunteers often attend nearby schools, and they are uniquely positioned to provide friendship from an older peer, making the approach a promising way to reach many children. In addition, high school students themselves are likely to benefit from the experience, enabling programs to touch the lives of two young people with each match. At the same time, however, high school volunteers' own developmental needs may influence how they perform as mentors. How does their age affect their capacity to be consistent, positive role models? What are the benefits to the children they mentor? What program practices are associated with match success?

To explore these issues, Public/Private Ventures' report, *High School Students as Mentors*,<sup>5</sup> draws on data from our large-scale, random assignment impact study of the BBBS school-based mentoring program.<sup>6</sup> Ten BBBS agencies participated in the evaluation, involving 1,139 youth in 71 schools nationwide. Half of the youth (the "Littles") were randomly selected to be matched with volunteer mentors (their "Bigs," who were almost evenly divided between adults and high school students), while the other half did not receive mentoring. The youth, their teachers and their mentors were surveyed at three points during the 15-month study. We also surveyed and interviewed BBBS staff and interviewed key school personnel.<sup>7</sup>

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### Major Findings

Our findings suggest that high school volunteers bring inherent strengths to their role as mentors, but these volunteers may also present challenges for programs. The volunteers' attention and friendship can be an important asset for the many children lacking in peer social skills or experiences. And high school Bigs showed hints of approaching their matches in ways that could potentially be linked to benefits for their Littles. For example, they involved their Littles in decision-making more often than adults, an important indicator of match success. They also engaged their Littles in academic activities less often than adults—past research has linked academic activities with lower levels of mentor satisfaction and weaker benefits for children.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, **matches with high school mentors were, on average, fairly similar to adult matches in both their length and quality<sup>9</sup>—two key precursors to strong outcomes. However, there are several important caveats.** The high school Bigs tended to be quite involved in extracurricular activities, and almost two fifths had paying jobs. Perhaps because of how busy they were, they were less consistent than adult Bigs in attending match meetings,

missing an average of 4.8 meetings over the course of the school year, compared with an average of 3.5 missed meetings for adults. High school Bigs were also less likely to carry over their matches into the following school year.

Carryover was particularly infrequent in three groups. About one quarter of the high school volunteers were seniors when they were matched with their Little, and, not surprisingly, they were less likely than younger high school Bigs to carry over their match. In addition, high school Bigs often participated in SBM as part of a class or community service requirement and received school credit for their participation; these Bigs were less likely to carry over their matches than students who did not receive credit. Finally, Bigs in programs with only high school mentors were less likely to carry over their matches than those in programs with both high school and adult Bigs.

Practices differed among the programs in this study, and **several practices were associated with longer and higher-quality matches.** High school volunteers who received at least two hours of training, as well as those who had high-quality support from BBBS staff, reported experiencing stronger and closer relationships with their Littles than those who received less training or had less support. In addition, volunteers who reported receiving higher-quality training were more likely to carry over their match into a second school year.

One other program characteristic appeared to make a difference. More than three quarters of the matches with high school Bigs met in the presence of other matches in one large space, such as the school gym. Meeting in this setting had both benefits and drawbacks. The matches lasted longer than those meeting independently. However, the Littles reported lower levels of youth-centeredness, possibly resulting from high school Bigs having difficulty focusing on the children's needs while in the presence of their own peers.

Despite promising findings about the length and quality of the matches, children with high school Bigs benefited, on average, very little from their mentoring experience, at least in those areas we assessed. Our impact study measured the benefits of SBM for children across 31 outcomes in such broad categories as academic performance and classroom and social behavior. **Overall, Littles matched with high school Bigs improved relative to their non-mentored peers in only one outcome: teacher-reported social acceptance.** In contrast, Littles matched with adult Bigs performed better than their non-mentored peers in 12 outcomes, including teachers' reports of classroom effort, positive social behavior, quality of class work, number of

assignments completed, written and oral language, skipping school, classroom misbehavior and serious school misconduct (such as fighting); and children's reports of their grades, their perception of their academic ability, skipping school, and expectations about going to and finishing college.

In SBM, program staff are able to be present in the schools during match meetings to provide supervision and support. In our study, 62 percent of the high school Bigs had BBBS staff either always or often present at their match meetings. **How often high school mentors talked with BBBS staff was the one program practice associated with positive outcomes for the children in our study.** Relative to Littles in programs where their high school Big had infrequent communication with BBBS staff, Littles in programs with more frequent communication experienced bigger gains in five outcomes: social acceptance, assertiveness, positive classroom affect, classroom effort and school preparedness. In addition, Littles in these high-communication programs performed significantly better than their non-mentored peers in the first three of these outcomes, as well as in overall academic performance and performance in reading and in science, task orientation, teacher-reported teacher-student relationship quality, and unexcused absences.

## Implications for Practice and Policy

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Although, on average, high school Bigs were much less effective than adults at yielding impacts for their Littles, our findings indicate that they bring unique assets to their matches. While their Littles improved relative to their non-mentored peers in only one area (social acceptance), impacts in one additional peer-related area (assertiveness) were significantly bigger than those received by Littles matched with adults. High school Bigs' inherent understanding of how to help their Littles improve their relationships with others may be a valuable strength that programs should try to capitalize on.

Importantly, our findings also suggest that targeted program practices may help high school Bigs become more effective mentors. To ensure that matches last long enough—and mentors are consistent enough—to make a difference in the lives of children, programs should be attentive to at least two factors when recruiting high school volunteers. First, because many students who volunteered as part of classes or service requirements remained as Bigs only until the end of the commitment required for receiving credit, making credit contingent on a full year (or more) of service may be important. Credit should also be

contingent on Bigs' consistent attendance at match meetings. Second, programs that want matches to last longer than one school year should make this goal explicit when recruiting volunteers and try to involve high school students before their senior year. In addition, where possible, programs should explore how to incorporate adult volunteers into high school Bigs programs. High school Bigs in programs that used both high school and adult volunteers had longer matches, suggesting that they may have been positively influenced by the presence of adults.

Programs should also shape their pre-match and ongoing training to address the specific needs of high school Bigs. Two hours of training was the *minimum* necessary for them to have longer and higher-quality relationships with their Littles. The content of trainings should be tailored to ensure that volunteers have the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge to mentor a child. For example, high school Bigs missed more match meetings than adult Bigs, and inconsistent mentoring may be worse for a child's self-esteem than no mentoring at all.<sup>10</sup> Thus, training for high school volunteers should address the importance of consistency.

Another key practice involves providing significant communication with, and support for, high school volunteers. Littles in programs with relatively frequent communication between their high school Bigs and BBBS staff benefited more than Littles in programs with less staff communication. Particularly strong supports should be in place for matches that meet in a group setting, such as the school gym. While the high school Bigs preferred meeting in the presence of other matches, and meeting in this context seemed to help retain mentors, this type of meeting structure may require significant supervision to ensure that the Bigs focus attention on their Littles.

These types of changes will require substantial work on the part of SBM programs and may also increase their costs. But those costs are an investment in quality. In times of budget crises, such as those that school districts are currently facing, it can be tempting to look for quick solutions to the challenges created by cutbacks in spending. School-based mentoring with adult Bigs has been shown to have benefits for children. However, as this study suggests, when an established program model is altered—in this case, by using high school Bigs—it is essential to understand whether it is still achieving its intended outcomes and how program practices may need to be modified to ensure its effectiveness. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is currently undertaking such efforts, by creating and testing an enhanced high school Bigs model that reflects many of the recommendations made here.

High school volunteers may have the potential to benefit thousands of children, especially children with difficulties socializing, but these volunteers require more and different kinds of support than adults. Recognizing—and acting on—these differences can help ensure a positive and productive experience for the many young volunteers being mobilized around the country to serve in school-based mentoring programs.

## Endnotes

1. In 2005, close to 870,000 children were in participating in SBM. See MENTOR. 2006. "Mentoring in America 2005: A Snapshot of the Current State of Mentoring." Available at [http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring\\_523.pdf](http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_523.pdf).
2. Glod, Maria. December 5, 2008. "Strapped Schools May Boost Class Sizes: Proposals Buck Recent Philosophy." *The Washington Post*, A1.
3. Karcher, Michael J. 2007. "Cross-Age Peer Mentoring." *Research in Action*, Issue 7. Alexandria, VA: MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. Available at [www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring\\_388.pdf](http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_388.pdf).
4. Personal communication, Keoki Hansen, BBBSA, December 5, 2008.
5. Herrera, Carla, Tina J. Kauh, Siobhan M. Cooney, Jean Baldwin Grossman and Jennifer McMaken. 2008. *High School Students as Mentors: Findings from the Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Available at [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org).
6. The high school mentors report was made possible by a generous grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies (to Big Brothers Big Sisters of America). The Atlantic Philanthropies, Philip Morris USA and The William T. Grant Foundation funded the larger impact study. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation also supported the impact study by fostering communication among key stakeholders during all phases of the project.
7. For findings from the full evaluation, see Herrera, Carla, Jean Baldwin Grossman, Tina J. Kauh, Amy F. Feldman and Jennifer McMaken with Linda Z. Jucovy. 2007. *Making a Difference in Schools: The Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Available at [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org).
8. For the importance of Littles being involved in decision-making, see Morrow, Kristine V. and Melanie B. Styles. 1995. *Building Relationships with Youth in Program Settings: A Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. For the limitations of engaging in academic activities, see Karcher, "Cross-Age Peer Mentoring," cited above.
9. We assessed relationship quality by asking both the Bigs and Littles a range of questions concerning how they felt about each other. Bigs were asked how close they felt to their Little in addition to five questions about the overall quality of their relationship, including their similarity in interests with their Little and the extent to which they trusted each other. Littles were asked how close they felt to their Big; eight questions about their emotional engagement when with their Big (e.g., how excited, important or disappointed they felt); six questions about their level of dissatisfaction with their relationship (e.g., "Sometimes my mentor promises we will do something, then we don't do it"); and five questions about the extent to which the match is youth-centered, engaging in activities that reflect the youth's interests (e.g., "My mentor almost always asks me what I want to do").
10. Karcher, Michael J. 2005. "The Effects of School-Based Developmental Mentoring and Mentors' Attendance on Mentees' Self-Esteem, Behavior, and Connectedness." *Psychology in the Schools*, 42, 65-77.

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