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Dave Shapiro, president and CEO of the Mass Mentoring Partnership, speaks at the Youth Mentoring/Dropout prevention strategy event held at the ATMC Tuesday. Souza Photo.

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By Jay Pateakos
Herald News Staff Reporter

Posted Apr 14, 2009 @ 08:52 PM
Last update Apr 15, 2009 @ 05:29 AM

Fall River — Despite a 66 percent increase in the number of city youths being mentored, there are still many students on waiting lists, many of whom are in danger of dropping out of school altogether according to a new report, "Mass Mentoring Counts."

The biennial youth mentoring survey, compiled by the Boston-based Mass Mentoring Partnership, tracks trends and gaps in mentoring programs across the state. That statewide report came one week after UMass Dartmouth's Urban Initiative and SouthCoast Development Partnership identified mentoring as one of the five strategies to counteract the regions high dropout numbers.

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David Shapiro, president and CEO of Mass Mentoring Partnership, said SouthCoast mentoring organizations like SMILES, Big Friends Little Friends of Fall River and Big Brother Big Sister of New Bedford have combined for a 66 percent increase in the number of youths being mentored since 2006. SMILES, Shapiro noted, saw a four-fold increase over those two years alone. But an estimated 183 SouthCoast students are still waiting for a mentor, a number that rises to more than 3,000 across the state, Shapiro said.

"We wanted to show how the people in the SouthCoast were doing against the rest of the state and how much more they are growing," said Shapiro. "Mentoring-specific data helps to pinpoint the gaps we need to close in on to help benefit the children across the region, and we will work with partners to leverage all the information to help in the pursuit of funding and increased mentor recruitment that can close the gaps."

The topic took center stage Tuesday at a Mass Mentoring program at the Advanced Technology & Manufacturing Center that addressed youth mentoring as a key dropout prevention strategy. Refuting myths that mentoring is just for elementary school kids, Mass Counts numbers showed while 22.5 percent of all mentees were between the ages of 5 to 9, percentages grew to 45.7 for ages 10 to 14 and 31.2 for 15 to 19-year-olds.

Mentoring programs are generally underfunded, Shapiro said. As for mentor recruitment, people have their reasons why they can't commit to a mentoring program, he said, whether it's time issues or the fact that it's done on a continuous basis.

"It's not exactly like helping the Boy Scouts clean a field for three hours. This is something that happens every week," Shapiro said. "For some people it just doesn't fit into their schedule or they have trouble making that kind of commitment."

SMILES Executive Director Jim Mathes said the school-based mentoring organization is seeing its first mentees preparing to graduate high school. This year, the organization is also addressing literacy-based learning in first graders, a program that Mathes said has flourished in Fall River and New Bedford.

"We had a slight shifting in strategies this year in the opening of our literacy-based learning programs that directly address leading educational indicators that if a child can't read at their grade level by third grade, they are highly likely to be a high school dropout," Mathes said. "Over the past four months we have opened three (program sites) and a fourth to come tomorrow at Watson Elementary School in Fall River and five to six in New Bedford which makes up a majority of our growth this year and focus for next year."

The SouthCoast had a total of 542 mentors in 2008, or 12 percent, second only to greater Boston which had 65 percent. In the statewide numbers, there was an increase of nearly 2,800 youth in formal mentoring programs across the state between 2006 and 2008.

Standing before the crowded room of mentors and administrators, Professional Business Printing owner and SMILES mentor Tony Pires recalled the conversation he had with Mathes about the impact he would have as a mentor and the need to not be a parent to the mentee but more of a friend who would be there to listen, guide and help where possible. His thoughts always came back to how one person could make a difference with the statistics revealing a major uphill battle to ward off increasing dropout rates.

"I think about the leaders that look at the all the (dropout) statistics and try to figure out a way to make an impact on communities and how to do it at such a large scale, and I am humbled by their dedication and commitment, and wondered how I can be of any help," said Pires, who has mentored Dominic Jackson, a Kuss middle school eighth grader, for the past two years. The pair are also linked as a Big Friend Little Friend as well. "Then I realize maybe I can't do all that, but maybe I can have an impact on one kid, and you know what, maybe that's just as good."

E-mail Jay Pateakos at jpateakos@heraldnews.com.

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