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OUR VIEW: Show the way

April 15, 2009 6:00 AM

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Just looking at Tony Pires and middle schooler Dominic Jackson yesterday, one could see their mentor relationship was working. Dressed in nearly identical suit jackets, the pair were all smiles as they took the podium to talk about one of the best ways to change a kid's life for the better.

Mentoring helps kids stay in school, take their studies seriously and feel better about themselves. A recent report on dropout prevention from UMass Dartmouth's Urban Initiative lists mentoring first among its five primary strategies, saying it provides a badly needed one-to-one relationship based on trust.

That's what's missing from the lives of many of the kids in local mentoring programs. Kids in need of a caring, supportive adult often (though not always) come from single-parent or low-income homes, where a parent may not be able to give the children as much time as they would like. Other kids are invited to be matched with a mentor because of academic risk — early signs of low achievement that could put them at risk of dropping out.

Yesterday, Pires and Dominic spoke to a meeting of mentors and other concerned citizens as part of a SouthCoast visit by the Mass Mentoring Partnership. In unison, they reached into their coat pockets for copies of their printed remarks. Each told of how they met through SMILES Mentoring at Dominic's school, then broadened their relationship outside the school through Fall River's Big Friends Little Friends program, which is similar to New Bedford's Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The three local groups have boosted mentoring significantly in the last few years, accounting for much of the rise from 502 youth served in 2006 to 848 last year throughout Southeastern Massachusetts, including the Cape and Islands and into part of Norfolk County. An impressive 52 percent of mentees in Southeastern Massachusetts are served by the Fall River and New Bedford groups.

SMILES has done a tremendous job recruiting new mentors. Since the program is school-based, in a familiar setting, SMILES mentors feel comfortable quickly. The greatest barrier to recruiting is probably the daytime schedule, which requires workers to get permission from employers to spend an hour a week at the school. Employers looking for a low-cost community service project should consider encouraging employees to participate.

Then, if the mentor and mentee hit it off, they may hope, as Pires and Dominic did, to spend time together outside of school. That's where Big Brothers Big Sisters and Big Friends Little Friends complement SMILES so well, because their guidance allows the mentor to introduce the mentee to new, enriching experiences. Dominic was thrilled to go to his first Red Sox game with Pires, a trip sponsored by the Mass Mentoring Partnership.

For all the success in SouthCoast, however, between 183 and 200 youth are waiting for mentors at any given time, and the largest portion of those are boys waiting for a male mentor.

We're doing well, but we've got more work to do. Caring adults can change the futures of our disadvantaged kids through role modeling, showing rather than telling a young student how to be successful.

LINKS

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