

Executive Summary



With growing pressure to improve student performance, schools are increasingly looking outside their doors for programs that can enrich children’s lives academically and socially. As part of these efforts, many schools have begun partnering with programs that provide their students with mentors—adults or older youth who visit students on the school campus, typically one hour a week during or after school, to provide them with friendship, support and academic help. It is hoped that by providing children with more one-on-one attention, they will be more ready to learn during class time.

These school-based mentoring (SBM) programs have become a popular choice for several reasons. Mentoring is based on a straightforward concept—children benefit from additional adult support and guidance in their lives—which both schools and parents can easily buy into. And because they require very little school staff time and are amenable to serving students during the school day, the programs are inexpensive and relatively easy for schools to adopt. Indeed, SBM is the fastest growing form of mentoring in America today and serves hundreds of thousands of vulnerable students across the country.

Background

The growth of SBM has been fueled, in part, by the proven benefits of community-based mentoring (CBM). Research on this more established program model—in which matches meet regularly in locations of their choosing—has provided strong evidence of the approach’s benefits, including decreases in drug and alcohol use, enhanced peer and parent-child relationships, better school attendance and improved attitudes about and performance in school (Tierney, Grossman and Resch, 1995).

Research suggests that youth may also benefit from SBM; however, because most previous studies did not use a rigorous experimental design, it is unclear how many of the observed improvements can be

Participating BBBS Agencies

The following 10 agencies participated in the study:

Agency	City
BBBS of Central Ohio	Columbus, OH
BBBS of Colorado, Inc.	Denver, CO
BBBS of Eastern Maine	Ellsworth, ME
BBBS of Eastern Missouri, Inc.	St. Louis, MO
BBBS of Greater Cleveland	Cleveland, OH
BBBS of Island County	Oak Harbor, WA
BBBS of North Texas	Dallas, TX
BBBS of Northeastern Arizona	Show Low, AZ
BBBS of Northwest Georgia Mountains, Inc.	Dalton, GA
BBBS of The Bridge	Wilkes-Barre, PA

definitively attributed to the program. Most existing studies also do not assess whether benefits of SBM are sustained beyond the immediate time frame of program involvement (usually one school year). Given the large number of students involved in SBM, it is crucial to understand more about both the effectiveness of the programs and how they operate. If SBM can improve youth’s experiences and performance in school, its widespread use could ultimately enhance the academic experiences of millions of children.

Thus, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), with the cooperation of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), embarked on a rigorous experimental evaluation of the BBBS SBM program, which is currently serving about 126,000 children nationwide. The study tested the extent to which BBBS SBM can, in fact, provide youth with measurable benefits. It also explored some of the potential strengths and limitations of this program model to help schools make informed choices about how to help their students succeed and to guide the mentoring field

in its continued growth. More specifically, the study examined a series of interrelated questions:

- What are the characteristics of the participating BBBS SBM programs?
- Who are the youth and volunteers involved in these programs?
- What benefits does BBBS SBM provide to youth socially, behaviorally, attitudinally and academically?
- What kinds of mentoring experiences help to ensure benefits?
- How much do these programs cost?

Ten BBBS agencies across the country participated in the study, involving more than 70 schools. Overall, 1,139 youth in grades four through nine were recruited into the SBM programs as they normally are—mostly through school referrals. A lottery was used to randomly select half of the youth (the “Littles”) to be matched with a volunteer mentor, while the other half (their “non-mentored peers”) were placed on the agency’s waiting list to be matched at the conclusion of the study, 15 months later.

To learn about the children’s lives, match characteristics, and how youth benefited from the program, the youth, their teachers and mentors were surveyed at three time points: as children were beginning their program involvement in Fall 2004 (the baseline), at the end of the 2004-2005 school year (the first follow-up) and again in late Fall 2005, in the next school year, shortly before the students’ winter break (the second follow-up). Mentors were also surveyed in early Fall 2005 to provide information on communication with their Littles during the summer. To learn more about the programs, we surveyed and spoke with BBBS staff and also interviewed teachers, principals and school liaisons (i.e., school staff, typically a counselor or principal, responsible for coordinating the program with BBBS staff). In addition, a cost survey was administered to agency staff in winter of the 2005-2006 school year.

Findings

The study allowed us to answer several questions of import in the mentoring field today. The following pages summarize our findings and conclusions.

Programs are quite diverse in their structure and focus. The programs involved in our study served children at different times and places within the school, used different age groups of volunteers and engaged matches in a wide range of activities. In some cases, mentors met alone with their Littles; in others, all matches met at one time in a common location. Programs have evolved in this way to meet the differing needs and expectations of schools and a widening volunteer base. Yet, programs may also need to consider which of these characteristics, if any, are most conducive to fostering strong relationships and benefits for youth—a question that awaits future research.

BBBS SBM is neither a tutoring program nor a CBM program placed inside a school. Contrary to concerns that SBM is simply a tutoring program, only 9 percent of the mentors cited academic improvement as their central goal in their meetings with youth, and only 11 percent of the programs focused primarily on academic activities. Yet, unlike CBM, these programs typically have some degree of structure (the programs outline at least some of the activities engaged in by the matches), and most matches do engage in some academic activities. Moreover, although most SBM volunteers are focused on relationship development, matches have less time over the course of the school year to develop the kind of long-lasting, close relationships commonly seen in CBM programs. In fact, despite fairly high levels of closeness reported by youth, volunteers reported feeling less close to their Littles than CBM volunteers involved in earlier studies.

Programs are reaching students with several risk factors and attracting a diverse group of volunteers—many of whom would not have volunteered in CBM programs. By targeting schools in low-income areas that were facing challenges in meeting academic performance standards and using teacher (rather than parent) referrals to identify children, the BBBS agencies reached students who might need the kind

of support that the program provides. Approximately 80 percent of the youth in our study received free or reduced-price lunch and/or were living with only one parent, and 77 percent were having difficulties in one or more of four assessed areas of risk (i.e., academic performance, school behavior, relationships and youth-reported misconduct).

SBM programs were also quite successful in attracting volunteers who, because of their age, would have been much less likely to participate in CBM. Almost half were enrolled in high school and close to one fifth in college—groups that are not typically utilized in CBM programs.

By the end of the first school year, the program had improved Littles' outcomes in a range of areas, including their academic attitudes, performance and behaviors. On average, given the typical delays in starting programs at the beginning of the school year, Littles received only slightly more than five months of SBM during their first school year of participation. Despite this short time frame, teachers reported that, relative to their non-mentored peers, the Littles showed improvements in the following outcomes:

- Overall academic performance, as well as in the specific subjects of
 - Science, and
 - Written and oral language;
- Quality of class work;
- Number of assignments turned in (homework and in-class assignments); and
- Serious school infractions (including principal's office visits, fighting and suspensions).

They also improved in the following youth-reported outcomes:

- Scholastic efficacy (feeling more competent academically); and
- Skipping school—which teachers confirmed by reporting that fewer Littles had an unexcused absence in the four weeks prior to our survey.

Littles were also significantly more likely than their non-mentored peers to report an important additional benefit:

- The presence of a non-parental adult in their life who provided them with the types of supports BBBS strives to provide to participants—someone they look up to and talk to about personal problems, who cares about what happens to them and influences the choices they make.

We did not see benefits in any of the out-of-school areas we examined, including drug and alcohol use, misconduct outside of school, relationships with parents and peers, and self-esteem.

The sizes of the first-school-year impacts, while modest, are very similar to those reported in P/PV's 1995 study of BBBS CBM programs (Tierney, Grossman and Resch, 1995).

One school year of the BBBS SBM program is not enough to permanently improve youth's academic performance. By the time of the second follow-up, in late fall of the second school year of the study, close to one third of the Littles had transferred to a new school—typical of SBM programs that serve fifth and eighth graders (who transition to middle or high school) and of the general mobility seen in schools served by these and other BBBS programs. These transfers contributed to a high level of attrition from the program: only 52 percent of all Littles received mentoring in the second school year of the study. Given the late start of many programs, even youth who were still involved in the program received only about three additional months of mentoring before the second follow-up survey.

At the second follow-up, Littles, compared to their non-mentored peers, sustained impacts in only one outcome from the previous school year: they were less likely to have started skipping school. However, they continued to be more likely than their non-mentored peers to report having a relationship with a supportive and caring non-parental adult. And, they were more confident that they would attend and finish college.

High attrition (in large part due to youth changing schools) almost certainly contributed to the lack of strong impacts for the full group of Littles. Those Littles whose participation ended in the first school year retained none of their positive school-related impacts at the second follow-up. This confirms what other studies have shown: short-term programs for youth do not induce long-term change (e.g., Walker and Vilella-Vellez, 1992; Aseltine, Dupre and Lamlein, 2000). Most other evaluations, including P/PV's CBM impact study, have not included post-program follow-up assessments, so it is unclear whether the effects of these other programs would persist over time.

High attrition also posed an additional, related challenge: Combined with the timing of our second follow-up, only a few months after the summer break, it undermined our ability to confidently determine the longer-term effects of SBM participation.

Longer matches and closer relationships are associated with stronger impacts. Exploratory analyses revealed positive associations between match length and outcomes at the end of the first school year, suggesting that longer matches may contribute to stronger impacts. The evidence from the second school year is less clear. Those youth who received mentoring in Year Two appeared to fare slightly better in school-related outcomes than those whose mentoring experience ended after the first school year, although only two differences (better classroom behavior and having a better relationship with their teacher) between these groups were large enough to achieve statistical significance.

Similar analyses found that those Littles who experienced more than one school year of very high-quality relationships received bigger benefits from program participation than Littles in shorter or weaker relationships. And, importantly, those Littles who were involved in weaker one-school-year relationships showed declines on several outcomes, relative to their non-mentored peers, in the second school year of the study.

Although our analyses of both match length and relationship quality could not rule out the possibility that youth characteristics were responsible for these associations, they do hint at the importance of strengthening the quality and length of SBM relationships.

Summer meetings appear to be an important way to lengthen and strengthen relationships. Only about 21 percent of mentors in this study communicated with their Littles over the summer at least biweekly, typically through letters or email or at agency-sponsored events. And the vast majority (85 percent) of these matches participated in one of the five agencies that made special efforts to encourage and support this communication. These efforts paid off: While we did not find strong evidence that summer contact was linked with bigger impacts, we did find associations with both match longevity and quality. Matches that communicated over the summer were more likely to carry over into the following school year and lasted significantly longer after the end of the summer than those that did not communicate. They also had stronger relationships in the second year of the study, regardless of the quality of their match in the previous spring.

Training, supervision and school support may also be key in fostering stronger and longer relationships. Although SBM volunteers generally have easier access to support (from both school and BBBS program staff) than CBM mentors, participating programs did not appear to consistently communicate with volunteers or provide them all with training. Yet, our analyses suggest that training, support and adequate access to school resources and space may be important in creating strong, long-lasting relationships.

SBM can be operated at fairly low cost, approximately \$1,000 per student per school year. Agencies paid approximately \$900 out of their budgets, while about \$100 of goods and services were donated by the school and others. These costs are fairly comparable to estimates for CBM programs implemented by the same agencies.

Recommendations

We believe that BBBS SBM is a promising intervention that merits support as it further refines its program model. The positive impacts on school-related outcomes at the end of the first school year, combined with the fact that the program is reaching many needy students who could benefit from additional attention and support in school, make the intervention particularly valuable for schools. SBM is also valuable for agencies in that it complements CBM efforts, both in its impacts and its ability to utilize volunteers who might not participate in CBM.

However, our findings also highlight several program practices that need strengthening as the field moves forward. Most important, as research has shown for other short-term interventions, the impacts we found at the end of the first school year do not persist without continued participation. This suggests that lengthening SBM matches may be crucial to ensuring success. Our analyses also suggest that improving the quality and continuity of SBM relationships may be important. Making these improvements will be challenging, given the current structure of the program. SBM programs often serve only a handful of schools in a community—when a child moves, transfers or transitions to middle or high school, programs can only rarely continue to serve the child. Student volunteers are also likely to have changing class schedules and can often only volunteer for a school year or semester. In addition, even those matches that continue meeting in a second school year often do not communicate over the summer, creating a four-month gap in the development of their relationship.

Our recommendations thus focus on ways that programs can increase the length, quality and continuity of SBM relationships:

- Start matches as early in the school year as possible;
- Ensure that volunteers provide at least one school year of mentoring;
- Build programs (or relationships with established programs) in feeder schools to sustain matches and provide youth with consistency through school transitions;
- Select supportive schools for program involvement and continually foster these partnerships;
- Explore ways to bridge the summer gap;
- Develop indices of match length that reflect the summer break and, in this way, are more sensitive predictors of impacts; and
- Explore more ways to provide volunteers (particularly young volunteers) with the support and ongoing training they need to create high-quality, effective mentoring relationships.

While these kinds of changes hold promise for strengthening matches—and by extension, impacts,

an important issue remains: Because the costs of SBM are comparable to those of CBM, and it appears to have a narrower range of impacts, why should agencies and funders invest in SBM when CBM could give them “more” impacts for their money? The important question, however, is not whether one strategy is “better,” but whether programs and their funders can reach all of the youth, and the types of youth, they want to serve using a single model. BBBS’ and other programs’ experience suggests they cannot. Volunteers who are willing to commit to CBM are scarce. Although some programs and funders may prefer to serve all youth with CBM, they would likely never reach a substantial number of the children who could benefit from mentoring but have not been reached in prior CBM efforts. And those who prefer to serve all youth with SBM may not provide as many youth with the kind of long-term relationship and more widespread benefits that can result from a strong CBM program.

It is also likely that different types of youth may benefit from different types of mentoring. CBM is likely best suited for youth who need a missing role model and friend and would benefit from a long-term, stable relationship. SBM, as it is currently implemented, is likely best suited for youth who would benefit from additional attention in school and an incentive to come to school, thereby improving their behavior and performance in this context. In other words, different children and communities have different needs that neither option can fully address alone. A complementary approach using both strategies is likely the best way for programs and funders to reach a wide, diverse group of youth and volunteers.

A big emphasis in the field over the past 10 years has been on increasing the number of children served by SBM programs. Our research has pointed to some ways in which these programs can be strengthened. Turning these findings and recommendations into practice will require time and money and will likely come at the expense of some growth. We believe that this kind of adjustment in focus—strengthening SBM programs so that growth is consistent with quality—is a worthwhile investment. The impacts we found in the first year of the study show that the program is capable of yielding solid benefits for youth. Building on this program model is likely to strengthen these very promising findings.