

Mentor movement starts with Capital schools

By Andrew West
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DOVER — The Greater Dover Committee has launched a mentoring movement with intentions of matching hundreds of at-risk children with volunteers in Kent County.

Rich Kapolka, executive director of Connecting Generations, is among the recruiters. He said it only takes a little time and a desire to help.

After many years of experience in schools and youth advocacy, Mr. Kapolka is a great believer in the power of mentoring.

“There are just hundreds of stories that I could tell about kids that I have seen helped,” Mr. Kapolka said. “But one that I often tell is



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From the Editor

about a boy who lost his mother in a car accident.

“He was a fifth-grader, a super kid, a good student, a good athlete. But after the accident, he really went into a shell.”

The boy, Jesse, began to isolate himself. His grades suffered.

A school nurse suggested a mentor could help and she was able to pair him with a man who also had lost a mother at a young age.

“This guy wasn’t sure he had the skills to do it,” said Mr. Kapolka. “After about three months, he said, ‘I’m really not sure I’m having an impact.’ But I convinced him to hold on until the end of the school year because he was probably having more of an impact than he realized.”

“Jesse would see me in the morning when he was getting off the bus, wanting to be reassured that his mentor would be there that day,” said Mr. Kapolka. “Right then and there, I knew the mentor had an impact on him.”

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The Greater Dover Committee has joined with Connecting Generations, Big Brothers and Big Sisters and Communities in Schools on a pilot program called “Capital Mentors” in the Capital School District. Other Kent districts will be included in the future.

The mentoring movement started last year when the Greater Dover Committee’s Ed Dulin, Bob MacLeish and Shelly Cecchett were trying to identify a new project to help children.

“As we were brainstorming ideas, the thought of a mentoring program excited us,” said Mr. Dulin, publisher of the Delaware State News. “From there, we spent the next year investigating mentoring organizations and programs throughout the state.”

“The more we looked, the more confusing and complicated it got. There were multiple groups out there, but they were all competing with each other.

“We got the three key groups together and asked that they work together, instead of separately, to help get our program start-



ed and to oversee it.”

Connecting Generations’ “Creative Mentoring” program is leading the recruitment and training efforts.

(Creative Mentoring has been around since 1990. Mr. Kapolka said the group had more than 1,000 active mentors working around the state last year.)

Big Brothers and Big Sisters will provide screening, interviews and placement of mentors.

Communities in Schools will lead an effort to place mentors in the high school and identify high school students to serve as mentors to children in elementary grades.

“This is really the first time that these three organizations are coming together in a very strategic way,” said Mr. Kapolka, who was a principal at Seaford and Christiana high schools and served as a Boys and Girls Club leader earlier in his career.

“It’s one of the best examples of a community education partnership I’ve ever seen and I’ve been involved with kids for over 40 years,” he said.

Part-time mentor coordinators will be assigned to each of the schools.

Grants are being sought to have AmeriCorps participants take on the mentor coordinator roles.

The Greater Dover Committee is accepting donations to help with the administrative costs associated with the coordinators, background checks and other needs.

“We’re hoping to build a reserve fund at the Greater Dover Foundation to help supplement and sustain the program year to year through tax-deductible donations,” Mr. Dulin said.

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The goal is to have more than 200 mentors in the Capital program this fall — 20 in 12 schools — and more than 300 in the second year of the program.

Dr. Huff said there were 115 mentors in the district last school year.

“Our hope is that we can really blow the initial goals out of the water,” said Ms. Cecchett. “While I’m sure doubling it would make a huge impact, I know that there will never be a time when we could say there is not a child who needs help.”

“There is a need. I know that the demand is much bigger than the supply for this.”

Mr. Kapolka said the numbers are very doable.

As an example of great involvement, he said Frankford Elementary School in the Indian River School District has more than 130

mentors. In some grades, more than half of the students have them and it shows in academic success, Mr. Kapolka said.

“Once you get a critical mass in the building with mentoring, it kind of builds on its self,” Mr. Kapolka said. “The mentors start talking to friends about how meaningful this is.”

The Capital program is just the beginning, Mr. Dulin said.

“Our goal is to have a mentoring program in each of the schools in Kent County,” said Mr. Dulin.

“When we first started talking about this project, we envisioned 2,500 mentors, roughly 10 percent of the current student population,” he added. “When you consider that many more than that are dropping out of school each year, it gives good reason to want to help guide those young people.”

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Mr. Kapolka said teachers will be involved in creating some structure and setting goals for the mentoring efforts after identifying the academic or social needs for each of the children.

Typically, the students will meet with their mentors during lunch or special periods during the day, so that the key academic instruction is not disrupted.

“The one-on-one is very difficult to do sometimes (for school staff),” said Dr. Huff. “The time that someone can sit there and listen, see where the students are coming from and respond, and provide that positive role model, is important.”

Dr. Huff said a mentor might help with reading or multiplication tables, and during the time together find that a child may open up and discuss their concerns.

“A caring adult for an at-risk student goes a long way in giving support to the student emotionally and academically,” said Dr. Huff.

Mr. Kapolka said the mentors signing up now could be approved and trained in September and in place in October. It takes about three weeks for a volunteer to get from registration through training, Mr. Kapolka said.

He is encouraging people to sign up now, completing an application at www.capitalmentors.org and registering for one of the training sessions listed.

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So who makes a good mentoring program candidate?

Mr. Kapolka said it is anyone who wants to make a difference in the life of a child, and

Mentoring

The Capital Mentors Web site touts the value of mentoring success with the following points:

- 92 percent of parents saw an improvement in their child’s self-confidence (Creative Mentoring End of the Year Evaluation, 2009)

- 69 percent of teachers saw an improvement in mentored children’s academic performance (Big Brothers Big Sisters End of the year Evaluation, 2009)

Mentored Students:

- Have a higher school attendance record and academic performance;
- Are more likely to go to higher education;
- Respond more positively to their teachers and parents;
- Are more comfortable communicating with their parents and society;
- Receive more emotional support from their friends and peers;
- Have a greater feeling of self-worth;
- Understand how academics ultimately influence and relate to the professional world.

who can commit to an hour a week for the full school year.

“Research is clear that the longer the relationship is, the more positive the outcome is,” Mr. Kapolka said. “So we want people to make the commitment for a full school year.”

“There aren’t any special skills required,” he said. “Probably the most important skill is the ability to listen. We just want to put adults who have an hour a week to completely devote themselves for that hour a week to that child.

“I know we all have had mentors in our lives and a lot of times it’s an informal mentor. But it’s someone who had a pretty significant impact on your life and who really didn’t have to be. They just took an interest in you.”

That could be said about Jesse’s mentor.

“Jesse knew that he was there for him,” said Mr. Kapolka. “They read together. When they would read a story and there was something in there about honesty or kindness or compassion, that was a teachable moment where they could talk.

“More than anything else, the mentor was there on a regular basis.”

Over time, Jesse’s outlook changed.

“He gradually opened up and told the mentor that his life would never be the same,” said Mr. Kapolka. “He lost his mother, his Dad had gone into a depression, he was having to take care of his sister, and he didn’t think anyone loved him anymore.

“This was a fifth-grader trying to deal with all that.

“If the mentor wasn’t there, we probably would have lost Jesse.”

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To learn more, volunteer or donate, visit www.capitalmentors.org.

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