As an English teacher of suburban, economically-disadvantaged, high school, gifted students for over a decade, I’ve welcomed hundreds of freshmen with great potential to the mystifying world of schedules, credits, and social uncertainty. With each freshman class, there are always a handful of students who do not realize their potential until they experience costly failure. Some students have to experience failure multiple times until they begin to take responsibility for their own learning. Sadly, a handful never realize their potential. Teachers of gifted children can recognize these underachieving students but may be confounded by their lack of motivation. What is to be done with these students who seem to have lost their drive? One effective intervention is mentoring.

Numerous studies have documented the positive effects of mentoring on gifted students. In one study, talented students who took part in a summer mentoring program improved their self-concept and developed positive adult relationships (Little, Kearney, & Britner, 2010). In an experimental study comparing the effects of mentoring on gifted and non-gifted students, Sahin (2014) found mentoring to be an effective strategy for improving creative potential. A professional review of the national mentoring program in Israel concluded that mentors created the conditions for their most talented students to develop their leadership and achievement potential (Zorman, Rachmel, & Bashan, 2016). Additionally, as part of a year-long mentorship program at the APA Center for Gifted Education Policy, researchers paired gifted students with adult experts across six domains of interest. Beyond building important adult relationships, students developed career goals and learned about the realities of success after high school (Subotnik, Edmiston, Cook, & Ross, 2010).

By providing a high potential student with a positive role model and fostering a nurturing, supportive relationship, a mentoring program can improve attitudes,
achievement motivation, and chances of success. There are opportunities and challenges along the way for the teacher who wants to start such a program, but the benefits to the students, mentors, and the community at large are innumerable.

Opportunities

Chief among the opportunities a mentoring program presents is a deeper level of community engagement for your gifted program. The NAGC Gifted Programming Standards emphasize the importance of collaborating with families and community members. According to Standard 5: Programming, educators should “regularly engage families and community members for planning, programming, evaluating, and advocating.” Parents of high schoolers are generally not as active in their children’s education as they may have been in the elementary and middle years. Also, teens tend to pull away from their families and rely more on their peer group for support and guidance. An adolescent mentoring program presents the unique opportunity to both involve parents and community members at the high school level and connect teens with positive adult role models outside of the family.

Another great consequence for teachers and students alike is the building of social networks. Aside from getting to know some outstanding individuals in your own community, you and your students will also build relationships for the future. Community members who volunteer as mentors can provide valuable resources in the form of career-related contacts, work and social connections, and ongoing support, not to mention treasured advice and wisdom. It’s a good idea to charge your most enthusiastic mentors with soliciting more volunteers for the program from their established social networks. Mentors who are willing to reach out to others on your behalf can aid in your recruitment efforts and build your program’s reputation.

Challenges and Solutions

Administrative Support

There will be challenges you must surmount for you and your students to enjoy the benefits and opportunities afforded by a quality mentoring program. First, a teacher should build administrative support. This may be a challenge if a school’s administration team is not particularly sensitive to the needs of gifted students. After all, mentoring programs are traditionally offered to troubled or “at-risk” students. Here, you enter into your role as an advocate for the gifted, noting that they have their own set of unique problems, and that they, too, require social and emotional support to grow and reach their full potential (Blass, 2014). You might also invite a member of the administrative team to assist in identifying mentees. You’ll find this support essential because a mentoring program takes time from your planning and instruction, involves both the school community and the community at large, and has some associated costs.

Community Outreach

Next, you’ll need to get the word out about your program. As a teacher in the digital age, I rely heavily on email communications, sometimes too heavily. It’s important to go beyond email. Many parents and older members of the community, retirees for example, aren’t as technologically savvy or as engaged with digital media as our students and colleagues. For parents, letters home and phone calls are tried and true methods of communicating school business. In high schools with more than a thousand students (i.e. most urban and suburban schools nowadays), there should be an autocall program used for community-wide announcements. This can be an excellent way to get the word out to parents about your program. As for the community at large, you should reach out to local faith-based organizations. Local service clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis can be especially supportive. While email is a fine way to inform faculty and staff about your program, you can add a personal touch by directly inviting specific teachers, administrators, or support personnel to mentor, especially if you suspect they’d be good at it!
Preparing Mentors

After securing your volunteer mentors, there is often an extensive vetting process that needs to take place. Most school districts will require a background check for external volunteers, especially if your program will include some one-on-one time between mentor and student. Save yourself time and frustration: learn the process of approving volunteers before recruiting your mentors. It may involve multiple steps and many different officials who only work during the hours you’re in class. Find out who you’ll need to rely on at each step along the way; recruit a parent or member of your school’s support staff to help out if needed, and follow up with everyone involved. Background checks cost money, of course. Approach administration or your school’s parent-teacher organization for funding. If, however, volunteers will be required to pay for their own background checks, be sure that they know ahead of time.

In order to entrust all volunteers with these and other aspects of the mentoring process, the coordinating teacher should prepare a training session or sessions. For teachers, the training can focus on the unique needs of gifted students, past experiences with mentoring, and the overall goals of the program. For parent and community volunteers, training should include the same elements plus relationship-building tips and techniques, an overview of community resources, and the legal aspects of working with minors, such as mandatory reporting of abuse and neglect. It’s also helpful for first-time mentors to include some role-play activities in order to build confidence and comfort with the new role they are taking on.

Prior to, during, and even after the process of navigating the red tape, you should make clear the demands of the program to all involved. In order to build a consistent relationship, it’s reasonable to request mentors communicate at least once a week with their assigned students. Availability of mentors and mentees alike can be an especially frustrating challenge. Often, it may not be possible to meet at a set day and time every week, so flexibility is essential. With committed participants, however, communication can remain open and ongoing. Of course, it’s important also for mentors and mentees to set boundaries. A mentee, may not, for example, want a mentor to visit them in their home. Parents may want to meet with mentors beforehand. Some mentors might not feel comfortable meeting the mentee alone for the first time. As each relationship will vary, each mentor and mentee should be trusted to establish the depth and complexity of their own engagement. A successful training will prepare your mentors for the important work of nurturing young spirits with compassion, understanding, and patience. Some essential components are:

- Connect to school mission
- Share legal requirements
- Communicate clear, focused goals
- Establish expectations, but be flexible
- Learn about mentees’ experiences and expertise
- Discuss the art and importance of listening
- Role play greetings and difficult conversations
- Provide student profiles and work samples

As you plan your program, you’re likely to encounter additional unexpected opportunities as well as challenges. With planning, diligence, flexibility, and an open heart, you can build a successful program that will affect the lives of everyone involved in positive and transformative ways. Most importantly, perhaps, you will have helped your gifted students get closer to realizing their full potential. TIP

References