

# MENTORING: A CRITICAL SUPPORT STRATEGY FOR YOUTH CAREER ENGAGEMENT AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

## A CRITICAL NEED TO SUPPORT YOUTH CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

For an increasing number of American youth, entering the workforce is far more challenging than they might expect. Over the last several years, the unemployment rate for youth ages 16–19 has hovered around 20 percent,<sup>1</sup> with worse rates for certain minority groups. While the 2009 recession played a role in these dire youth unemployment numbers, the United States has historically struggled to build the structural supports needed to effectively match youth with workforce needs. With more than one-third of Americans currently lacking the skills to access and succeed in family-supporting careers,<sup>2</sup> there is tremendous lost economic and social potential.

A variety of sectors report not being able to fill available jobs due to applicants having insufficient skills.<sup>3</sup> This growing misalignment between the demand and supply for skills means that young people will continue to be underemployed over the next decade. In fact, due to underemployment, young Americans ages 20–24 will lose an estimated \$21.4 billion in earnings over the next 10 years.<sup>4</sup> Since youth career engagement and workforce development programs provide youth with the necessary skills and experience to gain access to career-building jobs, the need to invest in such programs is more urgent than ever; these programs are increasingly finding that structured mentoring is a vital aspect of quality workforce preparation.

**\$4,100**

THE AVERAGE ANNUAL COST TO STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS IN FORGONE TAX REVENUE AND PAID SOCIAL SUPPORT BENEFITS FOR ONE UNEMPLOYED YOUNG ADULT<sup>5</sup>

## MENTORING AS A LEVER TO SUPPORT YOUTH CAREER DEVELOPMENT

One strategy to support youth career development is through positive mentoring relationships that allow young people to explore various career options, develop their skills, and stay engaged academically as they prepare for a career. Mentoring — the pairing of a young person with a supportive non-parental adult or older peer — can significantly shape the path to a successful adulthood. A meta-analysis of 73 independent

“Virtually every aspect of human development is fundamentally shaped by interpersonal relationships. So it stands to reason that when close and caring relationships are placed at the center of a youth intervention, as is the case in mentoring programs, the conditions for healthy development are ripe.”

*Dr. Jean Rhodes, Director, MENTOR/ University of Massachusetts Boston Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring*

evaluations of mentoring programs showed that mentoring improves a young person’s behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes simultaneously.<sup>6</sup> As an entry point into the world of work, there is a long tradition of apprenticeships, internships, and other relationship-based strategies that have centuries of evidence showing they are effective in helping youth find, prepare for and succeed, in careers.

In general, mentors set the stage for lifelong success by providing guidance, support, and encouragement that effectively build the social-emotional, cognitive, and positive identity of a young person. In addition to providing youth with the confidence, access to resources, and ongoing support they need to achieve their potential, mentors increase the likelihood of young people developing external and internal assets — structures, relationships, values, skills, and beliefs that promote healthy development and lead to future successes. Programs that formally incorporate mentoring are often designed around specific goals, such as academic achievement or career preparation. Mentoring also happens informally in other settings where young people receive guidance and support from an adult with whom they engage naturally, such as a job supervisor. Recent years have seen the growth of many different forms of mentoring — peer-to-peer, group, even online — all of which can be effective in guiding youth into careers if implemented with evidence-based practices.

### APPROACHES TO MENTORING

Developmental Mentoring

*Promotes general healthy and positive development*

Instrumental Mentoring

*Emphasizes skill development and progress toward specific goals*

While mentoring programs may emphasize one of these two approaches, most mentoring relationships by their very nature will incorporate aspects of both approaches.

### MENTORING: A CALL TO ACTION

This brief is meant to provide an overview of the state of youth workforce development in the United States and to illustrate the role mentoring can play in increasing youth career exploration and workforce development. Whether as a public/private investor, researcher, or program staff, we all have a role to play in investing resources strategically in a way that can improve the quality of and access to mentoring, while expanding our understanding of this approach.

## A NEED TO INVEST IN MENTORING

Many young people face considerable barriers in their lives that could prevent them from gaining employment successfully (see Figure 1). Mentoring can be a critical component of successfully supporting youth career engagement and workforce development in three important ways: improving youth's employability by building the necessary skills and work experiences that allow youth to succeed in a job and advance in a career path; facilitating continued academic engagement and achievement; and supporting youth in the development of non-cognitive skills necessary for successful employment.

**“ This program is truly a collaborative, community-wide effort. For three decades, it has engaged business and organizational supporters, volunteer mentors, school administrators, educators and students. Thanks to their dedication, mentees are broadening their horizons in school and in life. ”**

*Carmen Fariña, Chancellor, New York City Department of Education*

### A. IMPROVING YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY

Mentors can enhance the employability of youth in two key ways: providing guidance to address professional and personal challenges and enhancing career readiness skills. Mentors can provide a young person with the opportunity to shadow them at work and discuss various careers and the required skills and experiences for entry into those careers. Mentors allow youth to see what working in a field is *really* like and, through role modeling and identity development, allow youth to envision their future selves in a specific career. Young people can also work with their mentors to improve career readiness through related activities, such as resume and cover letter writing exercises and mock interviews.

### B. FACILITATING CONTINUED ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT

Educational success is critical in solving future workforce-related challenges with 35 percent of future job openings predicted to

require at least a bachelor's degree,<sup>7</sup> with another 30 percent requiring some college or an associate's degree. Mentors play a crucial role in keeping young people engaged academically. For example, mentors can serve as an intervention at the onset of early warning signs for not completing high school. Researchers note that attendance, behavior, and course performance in reading and math (the "ABCs") are highly predictive of students' likelihood to graduate from high school and to go on to succeed in college.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, as youth prepare to graduate high school, mentors can help them navigate their next educational steps and explore the types of postsecondary education needed for particular careers.

### C. DEVELOPING NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS

Mentoring relationships aid with the development of non-cognitive skills that are critical for success in life, especially in finding one's professional path. Increasingly, researchers attribute success in school and employment not to IQ or the acquisition of specific knowledge, but to young people's character: their ability to persevere, be optimistic, find motivation, and respond to challenges. Mentors can work with youth to help them set goals, build leadership and time management skills, advocate for themselves, develop self-confidence, and refine their belief systems and ethics, all of which can help them present their best selves in professional and employment settings. In a recent study of work-based mentoring programs, mentored youth reported increased self-esteem — a reflection of a youth's perceived competency and potential for subsequent career success<sup>9</sup>. Mentors can support youth through the challenges of gaining a foothold in the workforce and push them to persevere as their careers begin to grow.

#### FIGURE 1: BARRIERS TO YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

- Deficiency in basic literacy and numeracy skills
- Current or potential disconnectedness from school
- Substance abuse
- Difficult family/home situation (e.g., transitioning out of foster care)

#### MENTORING IN ACTION: New York City Mentoring Program (NYCMP)

The New York City Mentoring Program (NYCMP) is an initiative of the New York City Department of Education that has connected tens of thousands of high school students with volunteer mentors from local businesses, organizations, or associations to help youth navigate educational, social, and professional growth. Once coursework is done, students leave school and meet their mentors at their work sites or other planned locations throughout New York City. During mentoring sessions, mentors help mentees engage in career exploration, learn about goal setting, plan for college enrollment and enjoy the City's cultural resources.

**97 percent** of NYCMP senior mentees graduated from high school.

**97 percent** of NYCMP mentees enrolled in college.

**89 percent** of NYCMP mentees report they learned about different career options from their mentors.<sup>10</sup>

## MENTORING IN ACTION: YouthBuild USA National Mentoring Alliance

Created through a 2009 grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Mentoring Alliance (NMA) is a collaboration of over 70 YouthBuild programs nationwide. Focused on young people who have dropped out of school, the 15-month program starts with three months of group mentoring, followed by 12 months of one-on-one mentoring. In addition to incorporating a heavy job skills training component, mentoring matches in the program work together on Individual Development Plans (IDPs) in which students set out their growth goals. YouthBuild programs across the country have experienced success with this model of combining intensive skills development with quality mentoring:

In one study, students who were matched with a mentor throughout the YouthBuild program were 60% more likely to complete the program and were more than twice as likely to remain in the program (i.e. not dropped out or terminated enrollment).<sup>11</sup>

**58 percent** of program participants have received their GED.

**59 percent** of program participants have received a positive career placement.<sup>12</sup>

## SPOTLIGHT ON BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT

While this brief demonstrates the many ways a mentor can guide a young person into successful career paths, there is a more focused opportunity: Improving the workforce development and postsecondary educational outcomes of black males. While many American youth struggle to find a foothold in today's labor market, the employment outcomes for black males represent a true crisis:

- African-American men have twice the unemployment rate as their white peers,<sup>13</sup> with African-American millennials (ages 18-34) facing a 16.6 percent unemployment rate — double the national rate for the same age range.<sup>14</sup>
- African-American men (ages 18-34) are 30 percent more likely to be working part-time than white men of the same age group, with approximately one in four working a part-time job.<sup>15</sup>
- African-Americans overall represent 12 percent of the labor force, but 27 percent of those have given up looking for work and 23 percent are "marginally attached" workers who are clinging to employment.<sup>16</sup>

Mentors can play a meaningful role in helping black male youth find a more successful path into the workforce and a rewarding career. This work begins in schools, afterschool programs, and out-of-school time services where mentors can help ensure that black boys achieve academically and build non-cognitive skills.

For those boys who have fallen behind, leaders in the field, such as the National Youth Employment Coalition, have identified mentoring as a promising practice that can be leveraged to promote workforce readiness.<sup>17</sup> Mentors support the cornerstone activities of reconnecting youth to careers:

**“ Mentoring particularly skills-based mentoring and apprenticeship programs, prepares our future workforce by exposing young people the world and developing their life skills and vocational skills which are critical to success in today's economy. ”**

*Dr. Anthony Carnevale, Director, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce*

reengagement in the education system, academic achievement, and connection between school and career.<sup>18</sup>

The role modelling aspect of a mentoring relationship may be especially impactful for black boys matched with black, male mentors for their identity development and consideration of possible careers, especially in fields where black men may be underrepresented. Seeing a role model who looks like you thriving in an industry or profession never before considered can be a powerful gift from a mentor. Internships, summer jobs, and other work-based mentoring experiences represent a tremendous opportunity to provide more meaningful and intentional mentoring to help black boys see the possibilities that lie before them.

The economic impact of building the skills of these youth is considerable. Analyses have found that closing the education gap for black youth virtually eliminates the employment and wage gaps<sup>19</sup> — erasing what one report described as a "permanent national recession".<sup>20</sup> Strong relationships with mentors will be a key aspect of solving these national issues.

## MENTORING IN ACTION: Positive Effects of Mentoring

A recent study<sup>21</sup> conducted on the effects of mentoring showed that mentoring was linked to improved academic, social, and economic prospects and to strengthening communities and the nation as a whole. The survey found that compared to at-risk young adults without a mentor, those with a mentor were:

**81 percent more likely** to report participating regularly in sports or extracurricular activities.

**78 percent more likely** to volunteer regularly in their communities.

More than **twice as likely** to say they held a leadership position in a club or sports team.

## WAYS TO INVEST IN MENTORING

With at least 17 percent of young adults disconnected from school and career options and at risk of not achieving a productive adulthood,<sup>22</sup> there is a great need to invest in mentoring programs. In the past thirty years, the federal government has strengthened its investment in mentoring programs.<sup>23</sup> However, there are still 16 million young people, including 9 million youth in at risk environments, who will reach age 19 without ever having a mentor.<sup>24</sup> Public and private investors, businesses that employ youth, youth career development programs, and researchers can all support the mentoring movement by improving the quality of mentoring programs, increasing young people's access to mentors, and increasing the nation's understanding of both effective practices and the impact of workforce-focused mentoring.

### I. IMPROVE QUALITY OF MENTORING



Public and private investors ensure that their grantees incorporate proven, evidence-based practices in their programming. MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership's *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*<sup>™</sup> and National Quality Mentoring System offer excellent entry points for identifying proven, effective programs. There is also a need to invest in technical assistance and capacity building efforts to support programs in the implementation of these best practices. Additionally, investors can help improve the quality of youth mentoring by piloting new programs that utilize mentors in both general workforce development programs and within certain industries (e.g., the STEM field) while ensuring that there is a balance between content and relationships.

Traditional mentoring programs play a critical role in shaping the quality of career-focused mentoring experiences both in their own programs and in that of external business partners.

- In their own programs, they can improve the quality of mentoring by ensuring that recruitment efforts are focused on mentors from diverse fields and individual backgrounds that are reflective of the young people they will mentor.
- They can also provide cultural competency trainings for mentors that can help improve awareness, knowledge, and skills when mentoring young people from a background different than their own.
- Program staff can build a collection of career exploration resources and activities in which mentors and youth can engage.
- Lastly, standalone mentoring programs can support local businesses to build on the research-based practices used in traditional mentoring programs, creating mentoring opportunities for youth that go beyond hands-on job training or job shadowing to create an empowering, developmental work experience through strong relationships.



### II. INCREASE ACCESS TO MENTORING



Public and private investors can increase youth access to mentors in several ways. First, they can invest in youth employment programs that incorporate mentoring as a formal component. Second, they can support mentoring programs that use "youth-initiated" mentoring approaches such as "eco-mapping" techniques to help a young person assess their existing social network to identify new career mentors from their own networks. Third, the private sector can incorporate mentoring as a component of in-house workforce development and internship programs to complement the skills development and hands-on work experience they provide. Lastly, employers nationwide should look to build a culture of mentoring young employees to strengthen the next generation of workers.



Community- and school-based mentoring programs can initiate more strategic partnerships with local businesses and corporations to provide both shorter career exploration opportunities and hands-on job training to youth through internships. These types of partnerships can serve both youth development and business goals, such as professional development of current employees and the recruitment of future ones.

### III. EXPAND UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPACT OF MENTORING



To truly understand the impact of investing in mentoring programs, public and private investors can fund program evaluations to identify proven, replicable models that work, especially for disconnected youth who struggle the most to enter the workforce. These investors can consider a set of outcomes broader than traditional employment metrics when determining whether to allocate funds. One example of such an outcome is whether a young person is more engaged in their community or other positive activities, which may signal growth in key workplace competencies, as opposed to just examining whether they have been placed into a job.



Researchers can further the field's knowledge by conducting longitudinal studies on the effect mentoring has on professional outcomes, including entry to career sustaining positions, length of employment, and career progression. It would also be beneficial for researchers to design evaluations of youth career development programs that isolate the role mentoring plays in these outcomes.

**MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership** is the unifying champion for quality youth mentoring in the United States. MENTOR's mission is to close the mentoring gap and ensure all young people have the support they need through quality mentoring relationships to succeed at home, school, and ultimately, work. To achieve this, MENTOR collaborates with its network of affiliate *Mentoring Partnerships* and works to drive the investment of time and money into high impact mentoring programs and advance quality mentoring through the development and delivery of standards, cutting-edge research and state-of-the-art tools.

This report was prepared by Root Cause for MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership and supported by the Open Society Foundations

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