

## **SpringBoard Mentoring Program in Spring Branch Texas is Nationally Recognized**

Five years ago in the Spring Branch Independent School District in Texas, a small experiment was launched. The experiment involved about 40 adult mentors and students, two schools and a successful Dallas program model to replicate. Today the SpringBoard Mentor Program involves over 600 mentor matches on over 15 campuses throughout the school district.

The Spring Branch ISD is located about 12 miles west of downtown Houston and serves a diverse student population. The mentor program also serves many types of kids in the school district. Many are first generation immigrants. Some are students from poverty who may be the first in their families that will finish high school or ponder going to college. Still others come from more affluent families that have gone through difficult family issues. "Other people might call the students that we target the 'at risk' kids. We term them, 'kids on the brink of success,'" says Community Relations Officer Linda Buchman. Taking a more positive stance is something that is important to the program and fits into their work as asset builders.

The program addresses the ethnic, economic and cultural diversity of both the students and the mentors involved in the program at the outset during training. When the potential mentors go through training in preparation to go into the schools, the mentors are asked to respect the 21<sup>st</sup> century pop culture in which teens live today while at the same time helping students value and celebrate their heritage. Mentors are encouraged to share about their own cultures and heritage as they build their relationships through weekly visits with their "mentees." "Cultural awareness isn't an issue for us," says Linda. "If our mentors were going to be culturally insensitive, they wouldn't be in this program."

SpringBoard successfully matches volunteers from each of their partner organizations and businesses with students from one grade level at a school. "The logistics factor is the biggest key to success in this program," reports Linda. "By matching a cadre of volunteers with targeted students who are all on the same schedule and in the same grade, the training, weekly visits and communication with volunteers is a lot easier logistically." The logistical benefits of the model also enable volunteers to appreciate their time together. "They get to know each other and bond with each other. The volunteers like that because essentially they become asset builders for each other." In a time when adults are able to name fewer and fewer people that they are emotionally close to, such an additional benefit cannot be overlooked.

Much of the training time is devoted to helping the mentors learn how to respect, appreciate and communicate with the mentees with whom they will be paired. To do this, SpringBoard teaches its mentors about Developmental Assets and asset building. They start off by having the mentors remember back to when they were the age of the youth they are mentoring. They then take on the persona of their younger self and interact with the people around them in that identity. They remember many of the things that they went through in adolescence, and the training usually arrives at the conclusion

that kids today face a lot of the same challenges as the mentors did 30, 40 or even 50 years ago. SpringBoard's most seasoned mentor is 92!

By building this common understanding and awareness of culture and differences while focusing on relationship-building, the program lays the groundwork for success between their mentor-protégé pairs. And success is what they get. "We have found that behavior improves, attendance improves, and that teachers are happy- they see the results almost overnight." In a survey done in May, 2006, approximately 95% of student mentees said that they were more focused on school and their futures as a result of their mentor relationship. An asset-building culture permeates the schools as all students experience the care and concern of community members who visit their schools each week. As their mentors have conversations about goal setting, careers, and the future, the kids see that their community really cares about them and has hopes, aspirations and expectations for them.

A model as successful and well implemented as the SpringBoard mentoring model is rare. In 2005 the SpringBoard Mentor Program was awarded the National Civic Star for the state of Texas, an award recognizing "school districts that have teamed with local communities to develop and implement innovative programs to advance learning." The program is acknowledged as one of the best mentoring programs in the state of Texas. Additional information can be found on their website at [www.springbranchisd.com](http://www.springbranchisd.com).

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*Information for this article was taken, in part, from the Spring Branch ISD website, [www.springbranchisd.com](http://www.springbranchisd.com) and the online announcement for the National Civic Star Award at <http://www.civicstar.com/application.pdf>*