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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

BUILDING CHURCH-SCHOOL MENTORING PARTNERSHIPS: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND POWERFUL RESULTS

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People sometimes tell us that what KIDS HOPE USA does is illegal. That having trained church members mentor at-risk children in public schools must violate the constitutional separation of church and state. Compound this with a behind-the-scenes prayer partner for each adult child relationship and we are looking at major trouble.

Yet if this is true, why have over 300 churches in 27 states been allowed to mentor 5,600 children. And why are over 50% of requests for new programs coming from school personnel asking for churches to partner with them?

One such principal sent letters to 37 pastors in her community asking for a church to come partner with her school. Parents from the school even went so far as to follow-up with phone calls and visits appealing to pastors for help. They, like so many other superintendents, principals, and teachers, are keenly aware of the needs of their children and believe the church has the resource of love.

Unfortunately, confusion over the separation of church and state has kept many churches from getting involved with their neighborhood public school. Perceiving themselves to be unwanted or unneeded, too many churches have made themselves unavailable. Or, at best, have limited their own role to the occasional provider of material needs. But this has kept the church from harnessing its greatest gift: loving relationships.

Still more troublesome, other churches use this confusion to absolve themselves of any responsibility for these children. People have told us, "Until God is put back into the public schools, there is no reason for Christians to be there." Our response: "God has never left the public school. He roams the hallways looking for his people."

This issue, albeit an important one, is not what has kept most churches from serving the at-risk children of its neighborhood. Nor is it lack of compassion. What limits the church most often is a lack of understanding the needs of the children in the community and the role the church can play to help meet those needs.

The Children

KIDS HOPE USA began as a research project. Professionals in education, health and human services, religion, law enforcement, and volunteer services were asked to report on the needs of America's children. What they reported was startling.

America's children are more likely to be murdered, poor, pregnant, drug dependent or incarcerated than the children of any other industrialized nation. Depending on where you live, 1 in 4 children live in poverty, 41% live in single parent homes, and 31% lack a significant father figure. This last statistic is particularly concerning when you consider 72% of children in juvenile detention centers have no significant father-figure.

Several years ago Hallmark Cards offered each of the 2000 inmates at a maximum security prison a free Mother's Day card. All 2000 inmates requested a card. Thinking they had struck pr gold, they extended the same offer when Father's Day rolled around. Not a single card was taken.

Our research also revealed a significant amount of youth crime and violence. But when asked to comment on all the potentially negative influences that lead teenagers to such behavior and choices, law enforcement professionals were quick to point out a more fundamental cause. They noted that these children were first and foremost searching for someone who would love and care for them. They needed to be valued.

In 2003, the Commission on Children at Risk confirmed this in a report concluding that children are "hardwired to connect." Their ability to learn is seriously impaired without a relationship with a caring adult. In the absence of a connection, the children will turn to more destructive and dangerous behaviors and affiliations.

Such is the problem with many young people, especially between the ages of 7 and 12, who turn to gangs in hopes of finding love and attention absent at home and in the community. This deep need even takes them to the point of risking survival. The initiation ceremony for many of these gangs clearly illustrates the depth of their need for acceptance.

15 year old Armando was told that to join their gang, he would have to endure two minutes of intense pain. Every gang member, each wearing steel-toed boots, would simultaneously beat Armando. After the two minutes were up, Armando was to stand up by himself, embrace each gang member, and call them "brother." When asked why he would allow himself to endure such a beating, he replied, "I knew it would hurt bad, but I thought if I could take the pain for a little while I would be surrounded by people who cared about me."

The children need a relationship with one person who consistently and faithfully cares. One KIDS HOPE third-grader told his mentor, "If I died today you are the only person who will miss me." They need to know that they matter to someone.

The Role of Church

We then asked these professionals if there was a role the local church could play to responding to these needs. There were remarkably consistent in their response: "The church can make a profound difference in the lives of children if it mobilized and trained its members to form one-to-one relationships with the youngest children."

Unfortunately, the strength of this conviction was matched by their complete doubt that the church would respond.

Many of these professionals had worked alongside churches for years. Their experiences showed that churches were often generous in providing stuff: food, clothes, school supplies. But where they excelled at short-term acts of compassion, they often failed in partnerships involving relationships. As one frustrated social worker observed, "Churches pay, pray, and give stuff away. But they seem unwilling or unable to develop relationships with people in need."

Determined to prove them wrong, we interviewed church leaders. These churches ranged in size between 60 to 5,000 members. We asked one question: how many members of your congregation are engaged in a relationship with an at-risk child in the neighborhood? Of the roughly 30,000 church members represented by these churches fewer than 20 were involved in such relationships.

But how can this be? So much of the research on outreach points to the critical early years. 43% of American children who accept Christ do so under the age of 13. And, over 79% of people who do accept Christ do so through a relationship with a friend or relative. Despite this compelling research, however, churches tend to focus most of their energy and resources on preaching and internal programs. Neither of which have been found to be very effective in outreach.

One key discovery brought the problem into clearer focus. Pastors who were interviewed could, almost without exception, name church members who wanted to make a difference in the lives of children but did not know how. Churches were typically unaware of the needs of child in their community and, in particular, how to recruit, screen, train and supervise their members in these relationships. They didn't lack compassion, just the know-how to address the problem.

Inevitably, churches that wanted to help often settled for sending members to outside agencies or institutions to help. While offering the individual an opportunity for personal involvement, this robbed the church of the profound opportunity to build a meaningful bridge with children and families in the community.

The KIDS HOPE USA Mentoring Model

Out of this critical research KIDS HOPE USA developed a church-based mentoring model integrating what we learned into four key distinctives.

It is church-based. KIDS HOPE USA works exclusively through the local church, teaching it to engage its own members in one-to-one relationships with at-risk public elementary school children.

This church-based model was developed after three failed experiences using a more conventional community-based approach. The initial plan was to pool the combined resources of multiple churches in order to amass the greatest number of mentors and sustain their activity for the long term. The result was the opposite. When too many organizations owned the program no one truly did. And the church members did not feel a director connection between their efforts in the school and the ministry of their church.

Pastors too steered KIDS HOPE USA in a new direction. They told us, “Don’t create another outside agency where we send our members out to do good things.” Instead, they recommended a ministry model that allowed the church to build a bridge into the community. Within a church-based model, churches are able to weave their relationships into the mosaic of outreach, evangelism, youth and family ministry.

The church-based model also offers greater sustainability and focuses the partnership for the school in a trusted neighborhood resource. Mentors are easier to recruit and to retain because of the loyalty they have for their church and the sense of community they experience serving together.

It focuses on the youngest children. KIDS HOPE USA churches partner with a local public elementary school. The school identifies the children to be mentored and secured parental permission.

All research pointed us to elementary school as the critical, formative years in which values are formed, self esteem is developed, and academic skills are acquired. Many teachers report that by second grade they can already tell which students are likely to succeed.

Prison officials in at least two states have found a useful formula to determine the number of prison cells that will be needed in the future. They use the reading scores of third graders.

It focuses on relationships.

While affirming the need for academic help, professionals were adamant that the greatest needs were emotional and social. In the words of one principal, these children are “emotional checkbooks who are completely overdrawn.”

Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner stated it well: “In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activities with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last, and always.”

KIDS HOPE USA mentors commit to meeting with one child, for one hour a week, for at least one academic school year. This hour is a mixture of relationship building and academic tutoring. Most importantly, it is an hour the child spends knowing that someone cares about them. As children are brought into a relationship of love and nurturing, they begin to learn.

Consider the brain research. Researchers note that children living in an unstable environment operate at the base of the brain stem. At this level, the child responds to every situation by following either fight and flight impulses. These children are unable to process or apply information properly. They simply cannot learn. Remarkably, any evidence of love and nurture moves the child up the brain stem where he is able to learn.

Our record is 12 minutes. Nathan had not participated in class for two and a half years. But, after only 12 minutes with his mentor, Nathan returned to class and would not put his hand down. When asked by the teacher what he had done to bring about such instant change, the mentor reported that he had simply said two things in their first meeting: “Nathan, I’m happy to be with you today” and “Nathan, I think we are going to be really good friends.” By touching his heart, the mentor was able to open Nathan’s mind to learning.

It respects church-state separation.

Mentors are trained that there is no prayer or evangelism at school. Each adult-child relationship is supported by a behind the scenes prayer partner recruited by the church. This partner is often the only person who prays for this child. Principals and teachers continually affirm mentors for their faithfulness, their love, and their respect for the school.

Participation in church activities may occur but only with parental approval. The parent determines the full extent of the relationship. With permission the child and ultimately the family can be invited to activities at the church. For those churches desiring to make a significant difference in the lives of at-risk children, KIDS HOPE USA has given them the bridge.

We say at times that we help give churches a facelift. When families look at the church they see the name and face of a church member. “That’s Mr. Bill’s church. Someone in there really loves me!”

Powerful Results

Any church that truly desires to make a difference in the lives of at-risk children must break away from focusing primarily on intentions and begin to look at outcomes. School principals have made it very clear: “Faithful mentoring changes lives, unfaithful mentoring damages them.” Church-based mentoring programs should be able to evaluate their effectiveness on at least three criteria: stronger children, stronger schools, and stronger churches.

Building stronger children.

In 2004, the Carl Frost Center for Social Science Research of Hope College surveyed participating teachers on the progress of KIDS HOPE USA mentored students. According to their teachers, 99.5% of the children benefited from their relationship with a mentor. The mentored children showed improvement in behavior, motivation, and academic performance. In addition, teachers described the mentors as dedicated, reliable role models making a profound difference in the lives of the children.

Zeeland Public Schools (Zeeland, MI), one of the growing number of districts where all elementary schools are matched with a KIDS HOPE USA church, found that KHUSA mentors helped children develop 20 of the 40 “developmental assets” required by healthy elementary-age children according to the Search Institute of Minneapolis, MN.

Many teachers report a significant increase in attendance. These children do not want to disappoint their special friend or miss their time together. Even if it means they have to get themselves ready for school and out the door.

Building stronger schools.

Over 50% of requests for new KIDS HOPE USA programs come from public schools. Teachers and administrators are blown away by a church that respects them and helps them love their children.

Assistant Superintendent David L. Sipka stated: “We give much of the credit for Coopersville (MI) High School’s Blue Ribbon Award for Excellence to two programs initiated in our elementary schools nine years earlier. KIDS HOPE USA was one of those programs.”

In many communities, the greatest cheerleader for the local church isn’t even a member. It is the principal at the local public elementary school. A principal in Holland, MI attended the church partnered with his school one Sunday. Afterwards he approached the pastor and told him, “My wife and I were impressed that the members of this church were reaching out to needy children at our school with authentic Christian love.”

Building stronger churches.

KIDS HOPE USA gives the church a tested and sustainable vehicle to recruit, screen, train, match and supervise its own members for one-to-one relationships with at-risk children. This ministry can then be weaved into the mosaic of outreach, evangelism, youth and family ministries at the church.

Churches use this relational platform to develop an expanded presence within neighborhoods, reaching at-risk families most churches are not reaching. One pastor reported, "Our church is developing relationships with over 100 families as a result of KIDS HOPE USA." For many church members, this is their first opportunity to really make a difference in someone's life.

In fact, CHURCH HOPE USA might be a better name for the ministry. We are passionate about giving the church the capacity to engage its own members in one-to-one relationships. We work exclusively through the church, and are determined to leave it stronger than we found it.

Conclusion

Some Christians tell us that the real answer to the needs of at-risk children in this simple truth "Jesus loves the little children." And with that all their problems and challenges become secondary to the overarching reality of God's love.

Our response: "So what?" Can Jesus say their names, laugh with them, listen to them read, or hug them when they feel alone and unloved? He can through you and me. God chose to work through us to touch the lives of hurting children who are often just one person away from believing in themselves.