

Students Guiding Students: A Self-Reflective SMART Mentoring Program

By Dr. Barry P. Flicker



About the Author: Dr. Barry P. Flicker proudly serves as the Principal of Kutztown Area High School in the Kutztown Area School District in Berks County. He is currently in his 10th year in the position. He was honored to receive, on behalf of the staff and students of Kutztown Area High School, the National Blue Ribbon High School of Excellence in 2020.

Dr. Flicker's research, "An Investigation of the Effect of Advanced Placement Courses on the Short-Term Activity and Goal Achievement of College-Enrolled Students," is the basis for this article.

It is time to shift our educational focus to include our students' experiences looking through the whole child's lens. The knowledge students gain from modeling and peer-to-peer exchange "is an indispensable aspect of learning" and deserves the attention of educators (Bandura, 1971). How can schools effectively prepare students with the life skills of social interaction, empathy, and goal setting? By focusing on student agency through one-to-one, student-to-student social interactions, we can harness the power of students' voices, collaboration and accountability.

The students in Kutztown Area High School (Berks County) are piloting a mentoring program where ninth graders are paired individually with a senior mentor. The Kutztown students accepted the challenge of mentoring with an open mind and eagerness to pass along relevant perseverance and resilience strategies acquired through personal experiences. "The mentorship program has made me discover my own strengths and flaws while teaching the freshman strategies to help them academically," says Aryella, a senior mentor. The two hold each other accountable for establishing essential habits for success in high school and life.

Students hold one another responsible for learning.

The program's primary goal is to foster positive relationships between a select number of students and their designated upper-class mentors. For Blake, helping others comes naturally: "The mentoring program made me reach out and help out the freshmen more in a way that I wanted the seniors to reach out to me when I was a freshman." The concept encourages the life-long skills of good study habits, excellent peer relationships and constructive decision-making.

The students are paired based on their interests; teacher and guidance counselor input is strongly considered. The ability of pupils to function in a social environment that is constantly changing, social awareness and preparation are key factors for high school and future pathway success (Thomsen & Ackermann, 2015). Students coach others in the SMART principles of self-control, motivation, assessment, reflection and teamwork as part of the mentorship program. The program was developed as a result of doctorate research into the Advanced Placement course experience for high school students viewed through the whole-child lens. Participants talked about their experiences with stress, lack of sleep, social difficulties and the necessity for communities to re-assess student performance and well-being (Flicker, 2022).

What would current high school students describe as their biggest obstacles concerning their social, emotional and motivational experiences?

A limited sample of students participated in the initial investigation, which took place in the spring of 2022. It aimed to determine their SMART scores or gauge the five domains

covered by the framework – self-regulation, motivation, achievement, reflection and team-work – and to measure the five domains. The students' SMART results showed a need to concentrate on the child's holistic development through mentoring, introspection and peer-to-peer cooperation. According to a holistic approach to education, the poll queries pupils:

1. To self-reflect on sleep patterns and time with family or other support groups, and
2. To track the quality and frequency of positive interpersonal relationships beyond the regular school day.

The survey's self-reflective nature asks students to list their performance goals (grades) and learning goals (interests). The outcomes of the pilot program amply demonstrated the necessity and appropriateness of a whole-child approach to student participation through mentoring.

How was SMART mentoring introduced in 2022?

The findings from the spring pilot became the foundation for implementation in 2022. A request for interested seniors to act as mentors for incoming freshmen served as the program's opening announcement. The seniors attended a summer training session with administrators and guidance counselors. The preliminary data provided the framework for student mentor portfolios and curriculum writing. Senior mentors evaluated their understanding of SMART and how working with freshmen might help them develop their leadership abilities. This group became the program's leaders moving into the new school year.

For freshman teachers, a comparable professional development opportunity was created and offered. During the training, teachers concentrated on the five SMART mentoring framework topics as a self-reflective entry point into the holistic development of our pupils. The instructors act as the program's secondary mentors, providing feedback and implementation suggestions all year.

The teacher is instrumental, helped by biweekly meetings between the teacher, counselors and administration. Here, pupils were suggested based on the tiers of support they received. An illustration of a tiered intervention uses homework completion tactics, such as meeting with mentors for educational support and establishing a daily assignment book. To support the students further, we include the mentor whenever possible to assist with guidance on social interaction and decision-making.

How is mentoring affecting the culture of the high school?

The information the students gathered throughout the summer was assembled in a portfolio. The mentors' reflections and curriculum materials used in the program are organized in the portfolio for cataloging and reflection. The mentor's self-reflection and realization of the usefulness of their experiences in guiding and motivating others is a crucial part of the program. Through these relationships,

mentors express empathic behaviors, offer helpful advice and encourage student initiative. Most important is the positive changes that the mentors see in their *Smartie* (freshman mentee).

Aryella, reflects on her interaction with her *Smartie* when asked to share a highlight of the program:

"I explained to a freshman what they are currently doing in school will be on their transcript that colleges will look at when they start applying. The student just looked back at me with wide eyes. At that moment, it clicked that they needed to apply themselves now because it does matter."

Another highlight evolved from the ninth-grade career exploration tour completed with our county workforce board. In this example, ninth graders were asked to write a brief reflection on their trip and send it to their mentors. This correspondence was unplanned but will undoubtedly be included in future trips. The response from the *Smarties* to their mentors made a lasting impression on Leah, as she describes receiving two unannounced emails from her mentees:

"I received a long, well-thought-out email about the ninth-grade careers field trip from both of my mentees. This was so exciting for me because I could observe their thoughts on the trip – and they stated their real thoughts and not just what I wanted to hear – and how it impacted them and their future. I was not anticipating these emails, and they undoubtedly exceeded my expectations. This experience made me proud to be a mentor."

What are we discovering about seniors' willingness to mentor?

The seniors take the responsibility of guiding others very seriously and seek to build trust as a foundation for their mentoring relationship. Before any progress can be made in school, the *Smarties* need to know they care. Leah describes the value that she places on making connections:

"It is important to set a standard for the relationship a mentor and a mentee should have with each other. By relating to them and taking a second to catch up and reflect on the interests we share with each other, I was able to create a relationship that is still successful in being a leader and an example, but also their friend, which is very important."

The responsibility for the success of the program is a two-way street. The success of SMART mentoring interactions is as strong as their commitment to working together. In addition to supporting *Smarties* in the upcoming course selection process, mentors conducted a series of TED Talks on initiative and time management. The mentors understand the legacy of their role and request to be part of the training for next year's mentors. Their knowledge and insight will be instrumental in growing and maintaining a positive and collaborative school environment.

2023 Lift: Building a Positive School Climate, Together

By Dr. Susan Griffith



About the Author: Susan Griffith, D.Ed., has 15 years of experience in the fields of education, special education and educational leadership. She is the Director of Curriculum and Educational Technology at ARIN Intermediate Unit 28 in Indiana, Pennsylvania. Dr. Griffith is passionate about providing quality leadership that supports people in meaningful work and professional development.

The aftermath of a pandemic - teacher shortages, increased negative behavior and students' achievement gaps - paired with the ongoing changes in education can make anyone's head spin, but particularly administrators leading the pack. School leaders have a large lift in 2023 when it comes to engaging teams and building, or sustaining, a positive climate, but are they alone?

Climate can be hard to define and even harder to gauge, but research points to indicators leaders can focus on to retain, maintain or obtain a happy and satisfied workplace. A collaborative effort of course, but heavily reliant on the shoulders of the people at the top; one of the many burdens of leadership. The following three focal points are a *great place to start* when considering the climate of a school building.

- 1. Connection to values.** They say, "when you know, you know" and this can be applied to how team members connect with the values of an organization. Values, by definition, are one's perspective and personal views on what is important to them and worthy of their time. Time is a precious commodity and people want to use theirs on meaningful tasks and initiatives that give purpose. According to Dr. Dave Cornell and Dr. Chris Drew (2022), a positive school climate is possible when teachers perform their job responsibility with enthusiasm. To foster this type of high energy environment, values and goals should be created and communicated collaboratively.
- 2. Decentralizing decisions.** Sharing ideas and forming agreed upon decisions together can strengthen a team as well as provide a quick, expert perspective on immediate threats or opportunities (Vantrappen & Wirtz, 2017). On a more global level, such as central district office to building level, this is referred to as School-Based Management (SBM). However, decentralizing can go even further down the ladder to include grade levels, classrooms or other groups within the building. However, you name it, the goal is to empower and influence various levels of responsibility to assume leadership in their respectful domain. Teachers, instructional coaches, curriculum directors, paraprofessionals, building substitute teachers, parent groups and the like are encouraged to provide insights as decisions are being made (Harion & Loh, 1970). Decentralizing takes time to develop, with consideration given to the policies of the district, district goals and values and resources available (Llego, Marquez & Salioan, 2016).
- 3. Safety.** A basic human need according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a climate of safety includes social, emotional and psychological safety (Maslow, 1943). In 2012, Nettle Creek School Corporation in Hagerstown, Indiana, created a committee of parents and staff to identify and prioritize factors leading to a positive school climate, using the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) (NCSS, n.d.). The findings concluded that safety (sense of emotional safety and physical safety) was the top concern. In a team effort, the committee worked on identifying strengths within their safety protocols, providing some evidence that the perception of safety may have played a role in their findings.

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Districts spend a lot of time and money creating policies around safety, and yet, some stakeholders, staff and students are unaware of where to turn or how to respond. Safety does not stop with students; teachers need safeguards around their mental health as well. Creating an environment where space is held to acknowledge the hardships teachers (and all staff for that matter) are facing is warranted. During the pandemic, the coined phrase “better together” was used in several ads, workplaces and in media. However, teachers can often silo themselves and silence their own psychological needs as they tend to the high needs of students, often viewing their own needs as secondary (Boudreau, 2019). According to Mental Health America, to create a climate that allows and responds to this safety, leaders at all levels can ensure not only benefits that address mental health

needs, but taking time to listen, smile, laugh, have fun and remember “the why” can be a great way to reset and feel joy.

These focal points will not guarantee an administrator has automatically accomplished a positive school climate, and there are certainly many other angles to consider. Knowing the community, district, building and team will help identify a good starting point for an administrator. The most important nugget is that it’s not a one-(wo)man show, and it takes a village to develop a climate. Leaning into the district’s resource of people, trusting their expertise and listening to what is important may support a journey of job satisfaction, team mentality and eventually, hopefully, a climate all stakeholders are proud to call their own.

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What is the preliminary observation of the SMART mentoring program?

As the first semester comes to a close, the following discoveries are being made:

1. It’s possible that students who move to a new learning setting may face particular difficulties.
2. Connecting with an experienced, wise mentor is a great way to get involved with the school during the ninth-grade transition to high school.

3. The senior mentor program benefits both *mentees* and *mentors* equally.

We will contrast the data acquired at the start of the year with the data collected at the middle and end of the year as the mentor program grows.

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