Tutoring/Mentoring: A Service-Learning Strategy that Changes Lives

by Dan Bassill

Have you ever sat in a meeting where an education leader like Dr. James Comer talks about the challenges facing inner city kids, and about good work that could be duplicated if only there were enough resources? Everyone agrees. Why? Because he’s preaching to the choir. The Tutor/Mentor Connection (T/MC), based in Chicago and on the Internet, seeks to expand the number of people who understand the needs of kids living in low-income neighborhoods, so that there are more people who will take the advice of experts like Dr. Comer and change the flow of resources into neighborhoods where kids need extra help.

The T/MC focuses on tutoring/mentoring because such programs not only surround youth with more adult support, they also are a form of civic engagement and service learning that increases the number of adults who will get involved in capacity building activities. The T/MC’s goal is to help kids born in poverty be in jobs/careers by age 25.

As volunteers from the business community do service as tutors, mentors, and leaders of tutor/mentor programs, the T/MC seeks to educate them on the issues of poverty that make it more challenging for kids to get an equal education from inner city public schools. As volunteers bond with kids and understand the needs better, T/MC expects many to become leaders in their businesses who mobilize more business support for efforts that help schools prepare kids for careers.

The Tutor/Mentor Connection was launched in 1993 by leaders of a small Chicago-based tutor/mentor program called Cabrini Connections. In the 12 years since it was formed it has become recognized throughout the world for its efforts.

The T/MC maintains a database of existing Chicago area tutor/mentor programs and uses computer based maps to show where these programs are located in relation to where poverty and poorly performing schools are most concentrated. The T/MC hosts this information, along with a library of LINKs to organizations like Public/Private Ventures, Academic Development Institute, Social Edge, etc., on web sites including http://www.tutormentorconnection.org and http://www.tutormentorexchange.net

T/MC organizes quarterly events that coincide with the school year to help create public awareness and encourage volunteers and donors to support tutor/mentor programs. The T/MC calendar kicks off with a Chicagoland volunteer recruitment campaign in August/September. This leads to a Tutor/Mentor Leadership and Networking Conference in November, and another conference in May. An eConference format is now connecting people from around the world with each other, with information hosted on the T/MC website library.

The T/MC recognizes that it is too small to do everything needed to build an infrastructure that would make effective, volunteer-based tutor/mentor programs available in the hundreds of neighborhoods where they are needed. Its strategy is to recruit others who will host part of this information collection, learning, and networking strategy, just as it has recruited the Digital Workforce Education Society at City Colleges of Chicago and IUPUI. Its goal is also to recruit volunteers who will serve as leaders in their industry, faith group, alumni, or social group, just as it is doing at the Chicago Bar Association (http://www.lend-a-hand.net).

As a result of growing business leadership and the growing involvement of organizations who collect and share information about tutoring/mentoring and the educational needs of kids, the T/MC hopes there will be a growing number of people who do service and engage in learning and internet collaboration, leading to more and better tutor/mentor programs helping kids succeed in school and move through secondary education to jobs and careers. If you’d like to know more or become part of the Tutor/Mentor Connection, email the T/MC at tutormentor2@earthlink.net or call Daniel F. Bassill at 312-492-9614.

Additional web sites to visit:
www.tutormentorconference.bigstep.com
www.cabrinicconnections.net
http://tutormentor.blogspot.com