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Bill Cirone op ed column

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National Mentoring Month

By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

“If you can dream it, you can do it,” Walt Disney once said.

A senior executive with the Gallup polling organization recently summarized for educational and legislative policy makers the key ingredient that enables students to become dreamers and to succeed in school and in life. In a powerful address, he emphasized that the research was conclusive that “behind every student success story was a caring adult who provided hope.” That caring adult, in the words of one student surveyed, is “someone who encourages and believes in me.”

Clearly, mentoring is a critical component of student success, and January marks National Mentoring Month. Mentoring.org, which sponsors the initiative, notes that “Mentoring, at its core, guarantees young people that there is someone who cares about them, assures them they are not alone in dealing with day-to-day challenges, and makes them feel like they matter.” As youngsters navigate an increasingly complex and complicated world, the idea of offering them mentoring is as important as it has ever been.

The data underscores this importance: vulnerable young adults who had a mentor are 55% more likely to enroll in college. They are 78% more likely to volunteer regularly. 90% are interested in becoming a mentor, and 130% more likely to hold leadership positions.

Beyond the educational impacts, however, are the positive impacts mentoring has on the daily lives of young people: youth who meet regularly with their mentors are 46% less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs and 27% less likely to start drinking. Young adults who face an opportunity gap but have a mentor are 81% more likely to participate regularly in sports or extracurricular activities than those who do not.

A study showed that the strongest benefit from mentoring, and most consistent across risk groups, was a reduction in depressive symptoms. This is a particularly noteworthy finding, given that almost one in four youth reported troubling levels of these symptoms at baseline.

Mentors can also prepare their mentees for professional careers and assist with their workplace skills. They can help them set career goals, and can offer helpful suggestions as to the steps necessary to realize those goals. They can also learn at a young age the power of networking: they can develop personal contacts which can introduce young people to industry professionals, find internships, polish skills for seeking a job, interviewing for a job, and keeping a job.

“Light is the task” Homer once said, “where many share the toil.” Thankfully, there are many organizations throughout Santa Barbara County that “share the toil.” Fighting Back, Partners in Education, the Boys and Girls clubs, to name just a few, all place would-be mentors with local students.

Chelsea Duffy, executive director of Partners in Education, which since 1977 has been serving as a switching station that connects businesses and individuals with schools and youth-serving nonprofit organizations, sums it up best: “What we and classroom teachers all across Santa Barbara County have found,” she says, “is that it only takes one volunteer to encourage, to inspire and to reveal something new, opening the door of possibility.”

We are grateful to the hundreds of volunteers throughout Santa Barbara County who recognize the important work of mentoring tomorrow’s leaders. And for those who have been looking for a way to provide mentorship to youngsters, let National Mentoring Month be the occasion that launches your efforts.

If you have a sincere desire to be involved with a young person, active listening skills, and an ability to see solutions and opportunities, contact one of the organizations above today to get connected with a school or organization in your area that sponsors mentors.

In the words of a Buddhist proverb, “If you light a lamp for someone it will brighten your own path.” There’s a young person eager to meet you, and the introduction will brighten your path as well.

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