

MENTORING IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

By STATE SEN.
 MICHAEL R. KNAPIK



REGION – As teachers and students settle in for the 2011-2012 school year, mentoring programs across Massachusetts are also gearing up for the fall by implementing programs that seek to develop and foster relationships that will enable the youth to make well-versed decisions in an effort to benefit their academic, social and career interests.

These mentoring programs are of vital importance to at-risk youth here in the commonwealth. Each mentor-mentee relationship is unique with its own sets of goals and challenges, successes and setbacks, common interests and opportunities. The intrinsic value of the one-on-one and personal bonds forged by these relationships can exponentially impact a child's view of his or her own future, and that sometimes is the best motivator. Mass Mentoring makes a teacher's job easier, provides parents with an assistant and helps children reach their goals.

Here in Western Massachusetts, where parents are facing unemployment and underemployment rates well above the state average, Mass Mentoring helps replace a sense of desperation with a sense of hope. Over 1,600 local youth are actively participating in formal mentoring programs throughout Western Massachusetts. In my legislative district, Mass Mentoring Partnership, a statewide organization that supports youth-serving mentoring throughout Massachusetts, recognizes five participating youth mentoring programs including the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Holyoke, the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Westfield, Girls Incorporated of Holyoke and the New England Farm Workers' Council.

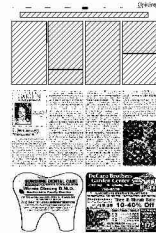
The Boys and Girls Club of Greater Holyoke established a mentoring program to provide support for children in the city of Holyoke.

In collaboration with the National Association of Police Athletic/Activities Leagues (PAL), the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Westfield has established a community-based mentoring program for middle-school kids between the ages of 10-13 in Westfield and surrounding communities. The program provides a structured, trustworthy and fun environment that enables the mentor and mentee to choose from a variety of activities at each meeting.

Girls Incorporated of Holyoke inspires girls to be strong, smart and bold by providing them the opportunity to develop and achieve their full potential. They offer a site-based, group mentoring program for girls 11-14 years old living in Holyoke.

The New England Farm Workers' Council school-based mentoring program is tailored for children in grades four through eight in two elementary schools and two middle schools in Holyoke. The program takes place on school grounds where the mentor and mentee meet each week in an attempt to strengthen academic success by identifying school-based resources that are available for youth participants.

The 1,600 kids in Western Massachusetts are among the fortunate ones. More needs to be done. In fact, an estimated 515 youth are waiting to be matched with a mentor. In 2010 the Mass Mentoring Counts survey of Western Massachusetts mentoring programs found that 113 youth were currently being mentored in Holyoke. Given that there almost 2,200 children between the ages of 6-17 in single parent families living below the poverty line, we are meeting just 5.2 percent of the current need for youth mentors in Holyoke. Just 23 of the 585 children living below the poverty line in Westfield and 20 of the 1,380 kids iden-



tified in Chicopee have been successfully paired with a mentor. This problem extends beyond urban communities into suburban and rural areas as well. Mass Mentoring has identified 31 children in Russell in need of mentoring. The stories are similar everywhere.

Mentoring works, and our state needs you and many more just like you who care about the future of our communities. More importantly, these kids need us. For more information on the importance of mentoring and how to become a mentor, visit www.massmentors.org.