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Mentoring survey reveals local trends, gaps

By Joyce Pellino Crane, Special to Mass High Tech

Video Gallery

Sophomore Sherlynn Abreu calls her mentor at Raytheon Integrated Defense Systems in Tewksbury her "perfect match." One of 120 middle and high school students from Lawrence to attend Raytheon's mentoring program, Abreu meets weekly with Alexandra Johnson, a mechanical engineer, for an hour of conversation and homework help.

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"Since the first day I met her I knew I was going to love the program," said Abreu, who has participated for the past three years. "As we got to know each other, I realized how much alike we are."

Raytheon, a defense contractor, has been nurturing students like Abreu since 2004, when Edward Warnshuis, founder of the Stand and Deliver program in Lawrence, convinced company officials to incorporate mentoring into their community outreach efforts. Today, Stand and Deliver is one of 165 mentoring programs across the state served by the Mass Mentoring Partnership of Boston, which oversees more than 20,000 mentoring relationships. The programs help at-risk youths improve their academic performance, enhance self-esteem and build social confidence by recruiting professionals to help them with school subjects and life skills.

Last week, representatives of participating programs -- including Middlesex Community College, the Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence and Philips Healthcare of Andover -- converged on the Raytheon campus to hear the results of a survey conducted by Mass Mentoring. The newly released survey provides comparative data highlighting gaps, trends and benchmarks.

One noteworthy finding: almost 76 percent of the state's volunteer mentors are white, but almost 54 percent of those being mentored are Hispanic or African American.

"We want to work harder to close that gap between who the mentors are and who the mentees are," said David Shapiro, president and chief executive officer of Mass Mentoring.

That's not an issue, however, for Abreu, whose family is Spanish-speaking. Johnson is both white and African American. "I was afraid they were going to give me a boring person that was nothing like me," Abreu said. "Then I got a perfect match."

The program is a source of pride, according to Mike Charley, vice president of Global Business Operations for Raytheon IDS. "Mentoring is important for our next generation of leaders," he said, "and Raytheon is proud of the difference we are making in our communities."

Abreu said she is thinking of becoming a teacher or psychologist, and that's where she and Johnson differ. "She's really good with math and I'm not. But I'm getting better," said Abreu, who credits Johnson's teaching techniques for the improvement. "I got very good grades in math this year."

For Johnson, the payoff is simple. "The outcome you can see," said Johnson, "whether it be her confidence or her academics improving -- that's what inspires me."

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