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SouthCoast mentoring effort applauded

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FALL RIVER — Mentoring, chosen by a recent study as the No. 1 tool for curbing school dropouts locally, has taken off in SouthCoast but will begin losing budgetary and political support if its benefits are not soon supported by hard data, a statewide mentoring expert told a gathering Tuesday at the UMass Dartmouth Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center.

David Shapiro, president and CEO of the Mass Mentoring Partnership, an umbrella organization for 165 mentoring programs, applauded the fact that SouthCoast programs are getting support from other areas such as public safety and higher education.

Not only that, but the three mentoring programs are cooperating with each other so that mentoring relationships that begin in school-only settings such as the SMILES program can branch out with Big Brother/Big Sister, run by Child and Family Services of New Bedford, and Big Friends Little Friends, run by the Family Service Association of Fall River.

"Tremendous things are happening in the SouthCoast," Shapiro told the gathering of mentors, along with business, civic and philanthropic leaders.

He called it a "collaborative movement like nowhere else in the state."

"It really is different down here. Anywhere else and this would have been five years of memorandums of understanding and turf battles."

Mentoring ranked as the top priority in a study of the region's chronic dropout problem released last week by the UMass Dartmouth Urban Initiative, led by former Fall River Mayor Ed Lambert, who led Tuesday's presentation.

UMass Dartmouth Chancellor Jean MacCormack told a personal story in which she came to realize that adults outside her own Irish-American family showed her possibilities that she might never have known existed, and which children without mentors might likewise miss.

In her case, she said, she was once fascinated by the Italian neighbor downstairs who made her own pasta out of necessity, but who told her to do what she loves. But since her father was a mechanic and her mother a waitress in their hometown of Dorchester, MacCormack said, they "didn't have a broad range of experience."

"It required lots of different people to be involved."

Today, she said, mentoring "is rediscovering something that was lost as society has changed." In her case, her pursuits brought her to the point where she recently found herself in Italy, riding in the same van with a group that included the head of the European Union. "How did a girl from Dorchester end up here?" was the thought that occurred to her, she said.

As an example of close, long-term mentoring relationships, businessman and mentor Tony Pires spoke along with his "mentee," Dominic Jackson, an eighth-grader at the Kuss Middle School who has been teamed with Pires for two years and has even spent time with Pires' family. It started with SMILES and reached into Big Friends Little Friends "to give us the opportunity to hang out more," Pires said.

"I couldn't ask for a better mentor," Dominic said, laying his hand on Pires' shoulder.

Shapiro emphasized that as widespread as they are, mentoring programs are overbooked. With 500 youths being served in SouthCoast, 200 are on waiting lists and must wait about seven months to be paired with an adult.

He said that while the age and ethnicity of the mentees is well distributed among the programs, the data are showing that most of the volunteers are white, indicating a need to attract more ethnic minorities.

The findings are part of a biennial survey just released called Mass Mentoring Counts 2008, conducted with the UMass Donahue Institute, which tracks mentoring trends, gaps and practices.

Mentoring was flagged by the Urban Initiative study as a key dropout prevention tactic because "it is a tremendous, low-cost, short-term strategy with immediate effects on achievement and attendance — two significant risk factors for dropping out."

Steve Urbon is senior correspondent of The Standard-Times.

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