Marshall Street



Building Student Leaders: Peer-to-Peer Mentorship for Secondary Students

A RESEARCH-TO-IMPACT PRACTICE DEVELOPED WITH THE NETWORKED IMPROVEMENT COMMUNITY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Building Student Leaders: Peer-to-Peer Mentorship for Secondary Students

Implementation Level

- ☐ District/Central Office
- ☑ School
- ☑ Program/Department
- ☐ Classroom

Who Implements

- ☑ Teacher(s)
- ☐ Instructional Coach
- ☐ Principal
- ☐ Central Office Leadership
- ☑ Specialist: Classroom Counselor

Practice Overview

What is the Practice?

Student mentorship is a peer support structure that pairs two students in a mentee/mentor relationship for regular formal and informal check-ins to build positive peer relationships and increase students' sense of belonging.

Why is Peer-to-Peer Mentorship Important?

Developing strong relationships with peers and staff at school is important because it can impact students' sense of belonging and connection to their community, factors essential to students' success for persistence to and through K–12 schooling.[1] Strong relationships are especially important for students with disabilities who are increasingly included in educational and community settings, yet may not always feel a sense of belonging and inclusion socially and emotionally with peers. Students with emotional and behavioral disabilities may particularly struggle to connect and relate to their peers. This struggle may be related to their disability, the way peers react to their disability, and sometimes a combination of related factors. Peer-to-peer mentorship provides opportunities for students to develop social bonds, create community, and learn new ways of relating to other students.

Why it Works

TEACHING AND MODELING DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS

Students participating in peer-to-peer mentorship have the opportunity to work on important prosocial skills that many students need modeled and reinforced as they develop relationships with peers. Peer mentorship focuses on building prosocial skills that all students need to learn in school and that specialized programs for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities work to teach, such as:

- offering to help someone,
- considering the feelings and needs of others,
- sharing and kindness,
- volunteering time,
- self-efficacy, and
- self-awareness.

These skills can be taught through explicit instruction in the classroom, but it is essential that students have opportunities to practice skills in a supportive environment that provides feedback and allows for them to make mistakes. Implementing skills with supportive peers can help students, particularly students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, generalize their learning to their interactions with other students and enhance their application of prosocial skills in other contexts.

STUDENTS BUILD CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNITY AT SCHOOL

As students build these interpersonal skills in their peer-to-peer mentorship program, they also gain a sense of belonging with students who were not part of their typical social groups at school.[2] Developing these relationships with other students with disabilities enables students to relate to peers with similar experiences and can also help them gain a positive identity and pride related to their disability.[3] The feeling of understanding from peers and the sense of belonging within a group of students create important connections between students and their school, helping them feel more engaged, respond more positively to authority, and improve academic achievement.[4]

MENTORS GAIN CONFIDENCE AND LEADERSHIP

The positive messages students receive about their disability from peer mentorship can help combat negative and exclusionary social messages students may have previously internalized.[5] Mentors also have the opportunity to build new leadership skills as they learn how to coach and support their peers with a similar disability.[6] As mentors see the positive effects of their leadership, their confidence grows, helping them in and out of the classroom. This creates a virtuous cycle, in which mentors' growing confidence helps them to further build up and support their mentees.

Implementation at a Glance

The information in this section provides a high-level view of what to consider when implementing this practice. **Enabling Conditions** describes the minimum conditions needed for successful implementation, including resources, mindsets, staffing, and recommended time allocation. **Steps to Implement** presents a concise checklist of action items, which are explained in detail in **How to Implement this Practice**, below.

Enabling Conditions

Prerequisites	✦ Network support through financial resources, time, and space to operate sessions, onboard staff to lead the program, and support for student attendance ✦ Private space for students to meet ✦ Staff member leading the program (mentorship lead) has: – Relationships with students – Deep awareness of students' needs and personalities – Level of proficiency in SEL, emotional intelligence, and other core program skills
Recommended Materials	✦ **Data collection tools** and processes (e.g., surveys distributed at the beginning and end of each grading period) ✦ Materials to motivate students and support relationship building (board games, snacks, bean bag chairs, etc.) ✦ Incentives for students
Staff Commitment	✦ Designated part-time mentorship lead to oversee program implementation at the school ✦ School-level leader to coordinate resources, training, implementation quality, and continuous improvement
Recommended Time Allocation	**Student Participants** ✦ 1 hour mentorship period weekly for mentors and mentees to meet formally and program lead to monitor **Program Lead** ✦ Train, monitor, and adapt the program (1–2 hrs/month) ✦ Regularly observe and monitor formal and informal check-ins and respond to student needs (1–2 hours weekly)

Steps to Implement

PREPARE NEEDED STRUCTURES

- [ ] Identify a peer mentorship lead
- [ ] Design tools, protocols, and norms
- [ ] Recruit students
- [ ] Get permission from families
- [ ] Create student pairs
- [ ] Create mentorship schedule

PUT PEER MENTORSHIP INTO PRACTICE

- [ ] Train student mentors
- [ ] Hold pre-meetings
- [ ] Hold mentorship sessions





Bringing this Practice to Life

FROM PILOT TO PROGRESS: THE SUCCESS OF PEER MENTORING AT MASTERY SCHOOLS

Mastery Schools' Simon Gratz High School in Philadelphia, PA, began piloting a peer-to-peer mentorship program in the 2021–22 school year to cultivate a sense of belonging among students in their school community. The program paired older students from their Anchor emotional support program with younger students, aiming to foster authentic relationships between them. Each week, mentors and mentees meet formally and informally to nurture their relationship and collaboratively address any barriers to learning experienced by the mentees. Over the course of two years, the Gratz team has expanded and refined the program based on insights gained from the pilot, enabling them to involve more students and better address student needs through this initiative.

Starting Small and Seeing Big Problems

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Gratz was separated into two campuses. Vernetta Newman, one of Gratz's emotional support counselors, ran a meet-and-greet day bringing together the upper- and lower-level students in the Anchor program. The meet-and-greet day was a time for celebration, socializing, playing games, and presentations by upperclassmen about the Anchor program on the upper campus. Vernetta and the Anchor staff found that these one-day events were insufficient to create a sense of belonging and community connection for their students. This need for community was particularly acute for students in Anchor who came from alternative placements, and others who experienced so many suspensions that they did not feel connected to school or their peers.

The team also reflected that students in Anchor were not attending school often enough and thought giving students a non-academic reason for coming to school might help. The team needed to find a strategy to help their students make connections at Gratz that would help them feel connected and want to come to school more regularly.

Getting Peer-to-Peer Mentorship Started

Once students returned to campus for in-person learning during the 2021–22 school year, Vernetta began building Anchor's peer-to-peer mentorship program as a way to connect older students in the program with younger ones. Vernetta recruited outgoing, assertive students with strong attendance records and demonstrated success within the program to serve as mentors. In the first term, three students became mentors, each with one mentee. In order to pair mentees with their mentors, Vernetta spoke with Anchor staff and, in some cases, staff at the middle schools attended by the students, to deeply understand students' personalities and needs. Unfortunately, Gratz continued to experience temporary school closures due to COVID-19, and the mentorship pairs could only meet regularly for about a month. However, during this time, Vernetta was able to learn important lessons about matching students, logistical needs, and structures for formal mentorship sessions that she could apply to the next school year.

Mentorship as a Way to Build Connection

For the 2022–23 school year, Vernetta took a different approach to identifying mentors for the program. She realized that less outgoing students could learn the skills for good mentoring — like how to communicate with new people — and that the program itself could teach those skills. Vernetta developed a mentor training curriculum and guidelines with explicit expectations for mentors. Twelve students engaged in peer-to-peer mentorship in the second year, and formal sessions were able to happen more regularly from the start of the school year. Along with formal sessions, Vernetta worked to build informal texting into mentor-mentee relationships to create less structured interactions between students. Reworked meeting protocols and solutions for logistical barriers meant that mentors and mentees were able to benefit considerably in the second year of the mentorship program.

By the end of this second year, the peer mentorship program was running more consistently. In end-of-year surveys, students expressed its value in helping them build connections:

- "I've learned how to control my emotions."
- "I can build a relationship with other people. Let's say I've been through a struggle, and they are going through it now; I can tell them how to get out of it cause I've been there, done that. Like having a problem with a teacher. I told [my mentee] to sit there, do the work, and follow the teacher's directions. You'll be out of that class in no time."
- "I was mad one day, and [my mentor] talked to me, 'Do you need anything? Do you need space to calm down?' Then we just started talking about what happened."
- "I always used to get in trouble, and he told me how to act over there, that fighting isn't worth it. Ain't gonna get you nowhere."

Learning to Improve

As Vernetta became more skilled at mitigating some of the barriers that hindered students from attending all their formal meetings, students voiced the value they saw in peer mentorship and expressed a desire for more mentoring sessions.

First, through some trial and error, she worked out how to ensure that mentoring sessions were held when students could all attend. This meant making sure that sessions were not during classes that students could not or did not want to miss. Finding a schedule that worked helped increase student attendance at sessions. Second, to increase attendance, Vernetta created permanent laminated passes for students to keep for the day and time peer-to-peer mentorship would be held. This way, students did not have to request permission from teachers for a pass each time, and access to passes was not a barrier for mentor pairs. In the end, Vernetta also realized she needed a backup plan for mentors or mentees who ended up without their partners due to an absence.

Students reported that they valued their connections and interactions with peers that resulted from mentorship even though pairs were not always perfect. Vernetta started to develop a rubric for determining which students could make good mentors. She realized that some of the mentees in the program could eventually transition to become mentors instead because of how their behavior had progressed in the Anchor program. After the first year of implementing explicit mentor training, Vernetta had insight into the amount and types of training and support mentors needed to build and maintain relationships with their peers.

Whether they felt they were gaining communication, self-regulation, or leadership skills, Gratz students enjoyed and benefited from the Anchor program's peer-to-peer mentorship. From 2019 to 2023, during which time Gratz implemented peer-to-peer mentorship, the percentage of Anchor students attending school at least 90% of the time increased by 26 points.



Mastery Gratz significantly reduced the attendance gap between student groups between 2019 and 2023.

How to Implement this Practice

This section provides step-by-step guidance for implementing a peer-to-peer mentorship program, along with accompanying resources to get started.

Prepare Needed Structures

Step 1: Identify a Peer Mentorship Lead

Identify a staff member who can lead the mentorship program. School leaders can support this program lead by giving them the authority to make decisions in the best interest of the peer mentorship program (e.g., giving students permanent hall passes or creating a schedule for formal mentorship sessions). The peer mentorship lead will also be more effective when given a clear set of roles and responsibilities for their role that empower them to oversee the effort. Some of the tasks they will be responsible for include:

- coordinating program schedules,
- creating student pairings,
- raising awareness and promoting the program among teachers,
- relaying expectations to mentors and mentees,
- monitoring formal mentorship sessions, and
- managing ongoing communication with families and students.



Because this role requires a considerable amount of time, it is important to consider other staff responsibilities when assigning the role. If existing responsibilities cannot be reassigned, consider whether a stipend can offset the additional tasks for the program leader. Mastery Schools provides a $2,000 stipend for their mentorship lead.

It is helpful to choose a program lead who deeply understands students' backgrounds and needs so that they can properly match mentors and mentees, address any emotional or behavioral needs during sessions, and communicate easily with students and families. A staff member who does not know students well will likely need to spend additional time talking to other staff members to gain insight into potential mentors and mentees.

Step 2: Design Tools, Protocols, and Norms

In order to plan and implement a successful mentorship program, it is important to create specific materials and resources that give mentors and mentees an understanding of the structure and expectations for their participation, such as the following:

- **Mentorship agreement form** to set expectations for participation in the program
- **Mentorship training materials** (e.g., presentation, worksheet, readings) to help students understand the purpose of peer-to-peer mentorship, their role, and how it can benefit them
- **Mentorship protocol** that gives students a structure to follow during their sessions to ensure they are communicating and collaborating with their mentor or mentee
- Attendance logs to track attendance at mentorship sessions to identify which students need help mitigating barriers

Establishing and communicating norms for the program's operations can build buy-in among school staff and minimize conflicts related to students missing class for mentorship sessions and submitting make-up work. Consider a regular communication strategy to remind teachers about sessions and obtain information about students' make-up assignments. With teachers' active support for the program, some absences from mentorship sessions can be avoided.

Because other absences are unavoidable, have concrete plans in place for mentor or mentee absences from formal mentorship sessions. Such plans might include alternative activities students do independently or an alternative meeting protocol for temporary pairings of students who are not in an official mentorship relationship.

Step 3: Recruit Students

The ideal recruitment strategy will depend upon the size of the population from which mentors and mentees will be identified. If students come from a large set of over 100 students or even an entire school, it can be helpful to have teachers make announcements, make school-wide announcements, and put posters up around school. For smaller populations, such as those within one program or classroom, it is best to use existing adult and student relationships to talk directly to students about the opportunity to participate in the peer-to-peer mentorship program. This strategy can be effective when recruiting students for a larger mentorship program as well. Encourage staff members to consider all students as potential mentors who could benefit from developing self-confidence and leadership skills, not just those who may already demonstrate those abilities.

Consider offering incentives to students to recruit their participation and retain them in the program long-term. Effective incentives may differ for mentors and mentees. For example, in the first year of their mentorship program, Gratz gave mentors a $25 gift card each quarter if they regularly participated in mentorship (i.e., they attended 75% of mentorship sessions) but chose not to give incentives to mentees. Mentors could earn a bonus $25 gift card if they met certain criteria (see mentorship competencies in **Step 7**). The Gratz team found that students enjoyed the program enough that these incentives were unnecessary going forward.

Step 4: Get Permission from Families

Engaging with families from the start of the program can be helpful in building buy-in and ensuring they can support the program implementation, particularly to encourage their students' attendance at sessions. At the start of any peer mentorship program, schools should provide detailed information about the program to families, including its goals, structure, activities, and expected outcomes. This information can be shared through written materials, presentations, or virtual meetings. This communication also allows staff to highlight the potential benefits of participating in the program for both mentors and mentees and address any concerns about how the program will be implemented and monitored. Mastery Gratz required all mentees and mentors in their program to have parents or caregivers sign a consent form in order to participate. Once the program begins, regular communication with families can provide updates on activities, progress, and any changes to the program as needed.

Step 5: Create Student Pairs

Creating cohesive student pairings is an essential part of having a successful mentorship program. Consider the factors that most often connect students at school, such as:

- neighborhood,
- cultural factors (e.g., religion, ethnicity, traditions)
- interests (e.g., video games, the military, hiking),
- TV shows,
- music,
- behaviors exhibited, and
- student schedules (e.g., out-of-school responsibilities, hobbies).

Using Data to Pair Mentors and Mentees

Mastery Gratz initially used student attendance and tardy data to pair students so that mentors and mentees would not be alone during sessions. For the second year of implementing peer-to-peer mentorship, Vernetta met with Anchor staff to gain more anecdotal and qualitative data to better understand which mentors and mentees would be best matched. They found this strategy to be more effective for matching students than solely relying on quantitative data.

When creating peer mentor pairs, it can be helpful to survey participating students to gather specific information about them to guide their pairing. An alternative strategy could be to allow students to meet in an informal setting and observe which students naturally gravitate toward one another. A more structured version of this approach would involve a "speed dating" scenario where mentees engage in five-minute conversations with each mentor, aided by prompts, to determine which pairs interact most effectively together.

Have a plan for how to respond if pairings are not working and need to be changed. Pairings may not work for a variety of reasons; it is a good exercise for both students in an unsuccessful pairing to meet together with the mentorship lead to discuss why the pairing is not working. In situations where there is a sensitive personal issue, one-on-one conversations with the mentorship lead can also be very helpful. Empower the students by asking what characteristics they now know they need in a mentor or mentee, as well as whether there is another student they think may be a better match. It is not recommended to change another successful pairing to rematch students. Instead, look for a student not currently engaged in peer mentorship to create new pairings.

Step 6: Create a Mentorship Schedule

Schedule times for formal mentorship sessions that are regular and consistent. Use student schedules to help determine the best day and time for these sessions so they are least likely to impact high-needs academic courses (i.e., English and mathematics). It will be important to communicate this schedule with teachers, particularly general educators, who will need to excuse students from class to attend mentorship sessions.

Consider what time of the day mentorship sessions will be least disruptive to student learning while also encouraging students to attend school. Gratz strategically chose to have the formal mentorship sessions during the last period of the day to support students' timely arrival and consistent attendance at sessions. Holding sessions at the end of the day also prevents students from struggling to re-regulate for a return to an academic setting after the relative downtime allowed by the mentorship check-in (e.g., eating a snack together or playing a game).

Put Peer Mentorship into Practice

Step 7: Train Student Mentors

In order to act as an effective mentor to peers, students acting as mentors will need training to help them build competencies that will allow them to facilitate conversations with their mentees. A helpful first step before designing mentor training is to know what competencies students should have when they finish the training. The specific competencies will depend on the mentorship program's purpose and goal. Competencies might include:

- leading a conversation with a peer,
- filling out protocols for sessions,
- making eye contact,
- requesting adult assistance,
- using technology for effective informal communication,
- creating SMART goals, or
- asking probing questions.

Plan to conduct mentor training before the first peer-to-peer mentoring session so mentors are ready when formal mentoring begins. Some mentors might need continuing training or support after the initial session(s). Consider having mentors identify areas of growth they hope to work on. Use these areas to coach them throughout the semester or year. This type of self-reflection and goal setting for mentors can help them build important leadership skills that will help them as mentors as well as outside of the program.

Step 8: Hold Pre-meetings

Every mentee should have a pre-meeting with their mentor and a staff member before mentoring begins. Use this pre-meeting to make sure students know that participation is voluntary, relay clear expectations for the program, have students sign their mentorship agreement form, and set up a communication plan. Encourage students to exchange contact information, and remind the mentor to reach out to their mentee before the first formal session. Starting the informal communication between mentor and mentee during pre-meetings can be very helpful to the success of mentorship. For example, using informal communication (e.g., text messaging), mentors can make sure mentees are at school for formal mentorship sessions in the future. This can immediately lessen potential attendance issues during formal sessions.

Step 9: Hold Mentorship Sessions

Peer-to-peer mentoring can happen through formal and informal interactions. Both types of interactions are important for the mentor and mentee to bond, transfer skills, and create routines.

FORMAL SESSIONS

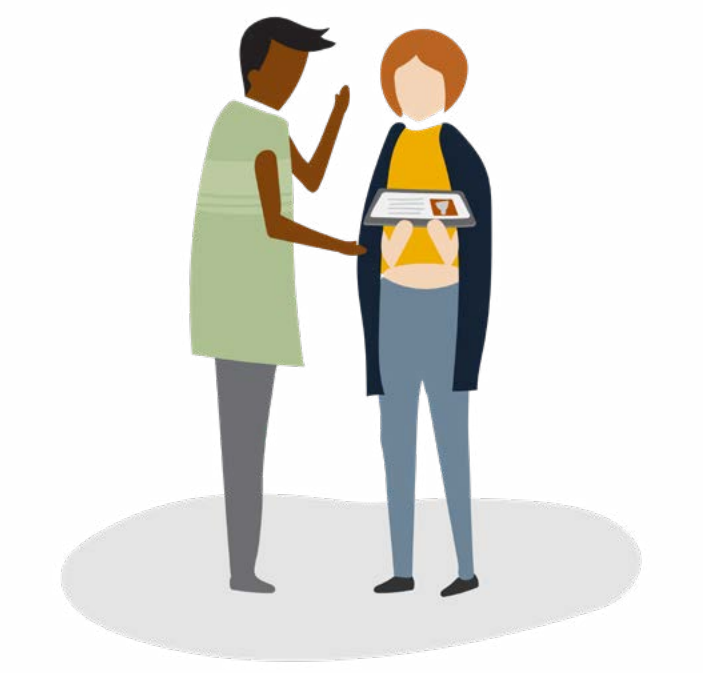
Students can be required to meet for formal sessions on a weekly or biweekly basis, depending on the schedule devised. Set an expectation that students will all arrive on time to maximize the session. Formal sessions can be as short as 15 minutes or as long as a class period, depending on the protocol developed and the ability of the mentor to facilitate the protocol. Initially, mentors may require more time to navigate the protocol during the first sessions. Regular, informal interactions can also reduce the need for lengthy formal sessions.

Make sure students have comfortable seating in private, non-classroom spaces to meet with one another. Mentoring spaces should allow conversations to be confidential. Consider having snacks available for students to help them feel more at ease while talking.

INFORMAL SESSIONS

Informal interactions between mentors and mentees can be used to help mentees move forward with any goals or action items that come out of formal check-ins. Ideally, mentors are informally communicating with their mentees at least once a week through text, in-person check-ins, or emails.

It is helpful to have a document or structure for mentors to communicate to the mentorship lead that an informal check-in happened. The mentorship lead can then easily follow up with mentors, remind them to check in on their mentees, and address any barriers they are having with informal check-ins.



Summary

Mentorship can be a powerful way for students with common backgrounds and experiences to support one another. Peer-to-peer mentorship programs that pair students who have similar disabilities give participants additional common ground. This type of program empowers older students to be leaders to younger students, to help teach skills, and to provide support as someone who understands the mentees' disabilities. Younger students have the opportunity to connect to older students whom they can look up to and use as part of their support system, increasing their sense of belonging at school. Participating in mentorship provides another chance for both mentor and mentee to gain new social, academic, and leadership skills that will help them navigate personal and professional relationships in the future. Mastery's peer-to-peer mentorship program was correlated with a substantial increase in the number of students attending school at least 90% of the time. Their success shows the potential for using mentorship as an effective intervention for improving attendance for students with disabilities, especially students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.



FURTHER LEARNING

5 Strategies to Build Student Belonging
PANORAMA EDUCATION

Building Effective Peer Mentoring Programs in Schools
EDUCATION NORTHWEST

Anchoring Emotions

BUILDING STUDENT LEADERS: PEER-TO-PEER MENTORSHIP FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

Appendix

How to Measure

When implementing student mentorship, monitoring how useful, usable, and utilized the practice is by participants and across the school system's programs can accelerate learning to improve outcomes for students. Be aware that improved process measures are usually necessary to ensure a high enough level of fidelity before outcomes will see improvement. At minimum, these measures are most essential:

PRIMARY MEASURES					
Measure Type	**Data Collection Type**	**Question Asked**	**Results**	**What does success look like?**	**Examples and Notes**
Process	Attendance tracker	Are students attending formal mentorship sessions? Yes / No	Average percent of students attending formal mentorship sessions	Increasing average percent of students who attend mentorship sessions until reaching 100%	It is also useful to collect data on the reason for absences to help determine the appropriate way to intervene if necessary.
Process	Check-in tracker	Are mentors conducting informal check-ins at least once a week? Yes / No	Average percent of mentors conducting informal check-ins at least once a week	Increasing average percent of mentors conducting informal check-ins until reaching 100%	It may be helpful to document the method used for informal check-ins to assess the variation in methods over time.
Outcome	Student survey Student interviews	Do students in mentorship feel an increased sense of belonging? Yes / No	Percent of students who report feeling a sense of belonging	Increasing percent of students feeling a sense of belonging until reaching 100%	Panorama, CASEL, and other surveys can measure sense of belonging. This could also be a process measure depending on the theory of action.
Outcome	Kickboard Feedback tracker	Do students increase prosocial behaviors aligned with their IEP goals? Yes / No	Percent of students who have an increased percent of positive points for behaviors aligned with IEP goals	Increasing percent of students who have a higher rate of positive points until reaching 100%	
Outcome	Student information system	How do attendance rates change for participating students?	Percentage point change in the attendance rate	Increasing attendance rate for participating students until reaching 100%	

Additional measures can guide a team to know whether peer-to-peer mentoring is leading to the desired improvements for students:

SECONDARY MEASURES					
Measure Type	**Data Collection Type**	**Question Asked**	**Results**	**What does success look like?**	**Examples and Notes**
Process	Attendance tracker	Are students arriving on time to formal mentorship sessions? Yes / No	Average percent of students arriving on time to formal mentorship sessions	Increasing percent of students on time to session until reaching 100%	It can also be helpful to calculate the average number of minutes that students are late to sessions.
Process	Mentorship observations Mentor protocols	Did mentorship pairs complete the formal session protocol? Yes / No	Percent of mentorship pairs who completed the entire mentorship session protocol	Increasing percent of pairs completing the protocol until reaching 100%	This measure is good for tracking how productive sessions are for students.
Process	Check-in tracker	Are mentees responding to informal check-ins from their mentors? Yes / No	Average percent of mentees responding to informal check-ins from their mentors	Increasing average percent of mentees responding to informal check-ins until reaching 100%	
Process	Student survey Student focus groups	Do students (both mentor and mentee) feel there is a benefit to the mentorship relationship? Yes / No	Percent of mentors and mentees who feel that they benefit from mentorship	Increasing percent of students who feel there is a benefit until reaching 100%	Analyze mentors and mentees separately as they have very different roles in mentorship.
Process	Student survey	Do students feel like they were well matched to their mentor or mentee? Yes / No	Percent of students who feel that they were well matched to their mentor or mentee	100% of students feel they were well matched to their mentor or mentee	Disaggregate mentors and mentees to determine if one group may have a different perception than the other.

Notes

1 Beck and Malley, “A Pedagogy of Belonging”

2 Welkowitz et al., *Students Speak Out*

3 Mejias, Gill, and Shpigelman, “Influence of a Support Group

4 Thapa, Cohen, and Gufffey, “A Review of School Climate Research”

5 Mejias, Gill, and Shpigelman, “Influence of a Support Group”

6 Welkowitz et al., *Students Speak Out*

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