

Sponsor-A-Scholar

A Summary of:

AN EVALUATION OF THE IMPACTS OF THE SPONSOR-A-SCHOLAR PROGRAM ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE Final Report to The Commonwealth Fund, December 1996, Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE), University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA) by Amy W. Johnson

Overview

Philadelphia's Sponsor-A-Scholar (hereafter SAS) program is built on the idea that a relationship with a caring adult can spur disadvantaged youth to achieve in high school and continue on to postsecondary education. The program matches at-risk youth with mentors who stay with them for five years—from ninth grade through the freshman college year. SAS also provides financial assistance to help students pay for college.

POPULATION

Thirty to forty students from Philadelphia public schools are served by SAS each year. Participants are nominated for the program by school staff in the 8th or 9th grade. They must be economically disadvantaged (based on qualification for the federal school lunch program) and at a middle level of academic achievement (Bs and Cs). They should also exhibit motivation to participate in the program and an interest in going on to college. Staff generally consider whether students would be able to attend college in the absence of SAS.

Evidence of Effectiveness

This 1996 analysis found that, relative to a comparison group, the 180 SAS students in the study:

- ◆ were nearly three times more likely to attend college the first year after high school
- ◆ had higher Grade Point Averages (GPAs) in 10th grade (an average of 78.8 vs. 77) and in 11th grade (an average of 78.1 vs. 76.2) and similar GPAs in the 12th grade
- ◆ participated in more college preparation activities, such as SAT prep courses, investigating financial aid opportunities or visiting a college campus (on average, SAS students participated in one and a half more activities out of a possible seven)

- ◆ who had low GPAs and high rates of absenteeism in the 9th grade, and those with minimal family support, did better than the comparison group across a number of outcome measures.

Evaluators also found that:

- ◆ The rate of absenteeism in 9th grade was a strong predictor of future academic performance for both SAS and non-SAS students.
- ◆ The more personal contact a student has with his or her mentor, the better he or she does on a number of outcome measures. A mentor's age, race, or location of home did not make a significant difference in student performance.

SAS costs \$1,485 per student per year in program operational costs (in 1996 dollars).

Key Components

Philadelphia Futures is the major educational program of the Greater Philadelphia Urban Coalition, a non-profit supported by the city of Philadelphia, corporate donors, The Commonwealth Fund and other private donations. Like Baltimore's [CollegeBound](#) and [I Have a Dream](#), SAS provides financial assistance for college and an intensive support structure to students. SAS services are delivered to students primarily at their schools on a one-to-one or small group basis. At least once a year, SAS participants from one class (i.e. the class of '95) from all high schools meet as a group. SAS features:

- ◆ \$6,000 (provided by the mentor, mentor's business, a group of businesses or a group of individuals) throughout the period of college attendance to cover student essentials like books and travel money (these funds are not included when colleges calculate financial need)
 - ◆ each student receives all \$6,000 regardless of the gap between financial aid and tuition costs)
 - ◆ a mentor relationship lasting five years, with mentors who see students at least monthly and keep in frequent phone contact between visits, monitor their students' academic progress by reviewing the report card, help with financial aid and college applications, stay in contact with program staff; participate in program activities, develop a long-term relationship based on mutual respect and trust and build communication with the students' families
- ◆ a "class coordinator" for each year who monitors the mentor-student relationship, reviews nominations and selects students for the program, holds meetings for students, reviews students' academic progress and plans for summer activities, and works with school personnel to ensure that students are on a college-prep track
 - ◆ an "academic support coordinator" who arranges for and monitors tutoring assignments, SAT prep courses and workshops on study skills, arranges trips to colleges and sets up workshops on financial aid, college selection, college applications and related topics
 - ◆ summer enrichment possibilities: summer jobs, workshops on study skills and SAT prep, academic programs at a local prep school, classes at a local community college and travel to a foreign country through the Experiment in International Living
 - ◆ opportunities for students and their mentors to attend local cultural and sports events

"Many young adults are growing up and leaving the education system earlier than their capabilities warrant ... For some, this is a result of isolation from the caring and consistent adult relationships that research has shown to be a common factor among many who do achieve success, despite disadvantaged circumstances."

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Contributing Factors

The Quality of the Mentoring Relationship

IRHE: "Because the quality of the relationship between mentor and student--not simply the fact of a relationship--seems critical to student performance, agencies that run mentoring programs should pay close attention to the selection, training, and monitoring processes that involve mentors ..."

Intensive Intervention

Philadelphia Futures has altered its approach over time to support a small, but intensive and long-term mentoring program rather than a less intensive tutoring program that could reach a larger number of students, but which might be less effective. In the early years, SAS served about 60 students a year.

Students came from nearly all of Philadelphia's 34 high schools. SAS has since decided to work with 30 to 40 youth per year, with youth concentrated in just 10-12 high schools.

More than the Mentoring: Program Support Activities

IRHE: "Program supports, in addition to mentoring, seem vital. Mentoring alone cannot provide everything to at-risk high school students, if the goal is to improve their academic performance and preparation for higher education." Program supports, beyond the scholarships and mentoring were the class coordinator, academic support coordinator, summer enrichment program and attending cultural events.

A Focus on High-Level Academic Skills

IRHE: "The implication of the lack of impact on students' measured self-esteem is that this outcome ought not to be the focus of mentors' efforts. While the lack of impact may be a function of a blunt measurement instrument that is not detecting significant changes in this area, the evidence suggests that programs and mentors alike ought to focus their efforts instead on high-level academic skills."

Rigorous Courses and Outside Activities

GPA gains in 12th grade may have been limited by two factors: 1) SAS students took more difficult courses than non-SAS students (significantly more SAS students were enrolled in two difficult courses--Elementary Functions and Physics); and 2) SAS students tended to participate in outside enrichment activities, which may have negatively affected their grades. (Also, as SAS evolved, students received more support services. Since the

"...the encouragement and guidance provided by a mentor or mentor-like figure, their sustained involvement, and proactive assistance with the college selection and application processes are key ingredients--along with financial assistance--in the success of social programs that aim to help individuals rise from poverty and get a college degree."

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first cohort had the least services, their GPA gains were less, thereby bringing down the overall average GPA gains.)

Access to Information

SAS students participated in significantly more college preparation activities because they had access to information that non-SAS students lacked. The evaluator suggests that the city might consider strengthening its counseling and advising services to extend the types of benefits received by SAS participants to more non-participants.

Students with Fewest Resources Are Helped the Most

Those students with low GPAs and high absences in the 9th grade, as well as those with minimal family support, benefited the most from the SAS program. Students attending schools with high dropout rates, or comprehensive high schools, also benefited greatly from SAS. This suggests that the program should target its resources at those most in need for the greatest impact.

Flexible Staff

Program staff continually monitored their work and made changes as necessary.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This evaluation studied 434 students (180 in the treatment group and the rest in a comparison group) from the Philadelphia public high school classes of 1994, 1995, 1996, and 1997.

Researchers analyzed student, mentor and guidance counselor surveys, high school transcripts, school district information on the characteristics of the high schools attended and Philadelphia Futures' program records.

Regression analysis was used to determine program impact.

EVALUATION FUNDING

Evaluation funded by The Commonwealth Fund.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

SAS services have reached students who have been enrolled in all 34 of Philadelphia's public high schools.

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