

# Sponsor-A-Scholar

## A Summary of:

**“Sponsor-A-Scholar: Long-Term Impacts of a Youth Mentoring Program on Student Performance”** (December 1999) *Mathematica Policy Research*. By Amy Johnson.

### Focus

- Early Childhood
- Primary School
- Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- ✓ Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

## Overview

Philadelphia’s Sponsor-A-Scholar (SAS) program, launched in 1990, was 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 five years – from ninth grade through their freshman college year. The mentoring relationship is a formal one that stresses academic goals, and it is buttressed with other supports such as tutoring, college visits and assistance with college application or financial aid processes. Mentors undergo formal, one-day training and SAS representatives regularly monitor the student-mentor relationship. SAS also provides financial assistance to help students pay for college.

## POPULATION

SAS serves more than 500 low-income students with average grades (B-C range) from Philadelphia public high schools. The evaluation used longitudinal data on a sample of 434 students from the Philadelphia public high school graduating classes of 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997. Of those, 180 students participated in SAS, and the remaining students were drawn from a matched comparison group. Of the evaluated SAS students, 76% were African American, 10% Latino, 7% Asian and 7% white. Some SAS students are nominated by teachers and counselors at their middle schools while others are nominated by high school staff. SAS targets students who exhibit evidence of motivation through participation in extracurricular activities, good attendance, completion of program forms clearly and on time and an expressed interest in participating in the program and working toward the goal of college attendance. Adult mentors are volunteers from the greater Philadelphia area matched with students by gender and areas of interest (but not by race/ethnicity).

## Key Findings

The evaluator considered the program’s effect on GPA, rates of college attendance, and attendance in college preparation activities, as well as qualitative information from interviews with students and mentors.

- ◆ SAS students had a higher average GPA than the comparison group (78.8 vs. 77 for tenth graders and 78.1 vs. 76.2 for eleventh graders),

differences that were significant at the .05 level. However, no differences were found for twelfth graders.

- ◆ SAS participants had significantly higher rates of college attendance in each of the first two years after high school (85% vs. 64%, and 73% vs. 56%, respectively).

- ◆ The program is more likely to help students who have lower academic achievement than higher achievers. Researchers compared students with low ninth grade GPAs who attended the program with those who did not attend on the following measures: tenth-grade GPA, eleventh-grade GPA and first-year and second-year college attendance. Low ninth-grade GPA students who attended SAS did significantly better on all the measures (comparisons were significant at the .05 and .01 levels).
- ◆ Mentor behaviors, such as frequent communication and getting to know a student's

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— Amy Johnson, evaluator

*“A mentoring program that stresses academic goals can improve high school and college outcomes.”*

— Amy Johnson, evaluator

family significantly, affect student performance. Students whose mentors contacted them most often (at least once a week) did significantly better on tenth-grade GPA, eleventh-grade GPA, first-year college attendance, second-year college attendance and college retention (comparisons were significant at the .05 and .01 levels).

- ◆ The strength of mentor-student relationships varied widely, reported the evaluator, with 33% of mentors saying they had a strong relationship with their student, 35% saying they had a moderate relationship and 33% saying they had a weak relationship.

### Program Components

SAS mentoring services were delivered to students primarily at their schools on a one-to-one or small group basis. Mentors and students met monthly and stayed in contact by phone between meetings. Mentors monitored the student's academic progress, helped with financial aid and college application processes, contacted program staff on a regular basis to discuss the evolving relationship with and progress of the student and participated in program events. Fostering individual relationships between the students and their mentors was the primary function of SAS, and the following program components further defined or supported this relationship:

- ◆ A formal commitment was affirmed by signing a statement of intent in which the student agreed to comply with numerous responsibilities associated with participation: maintaining regular attendance in school, earning grades of C or above, asking for academic support when needed, keeping appointments with the mentor, communicating regularly by telephone with the mentor and program staff, attending program events, enrolling in college preparatory courses and sharing each report card.
- ◆ Mentor training was offered at an initial orientation session. Then, mentors were contacted monthly by program staff to assess and develop strategies for each relationship's progress. Mentors also participated periodically at mentor roundtables and received a regular newsletter.
- ◆ A part-time coordinator was employed by SAS to work with groups of 30 student-mentor pairs to foster effective student-mentor relationships by maintaining monthly contact with both the student and the mentor and monitoring the progress of the relationship.
- ◆ Academic support services offered by SAS included tutoring assignments, SAT prep classes, workshops on study skills and summer opportunities. In addition, students were offered workshops on obtaining financial aid, selecting a college, the application process and other related topics.
- ◆ Financial assistance — totaling \$6,000 — was offered to SAS students who attended college. The money was provided by the mentor or by companies/organizations that donated the funds.

## Contributing Factors

### *High-Quality Mentoring Relationship*

SAS recognized the importance of mentoring as an intensive commitment that went well beyond incidental and sporadic encounters between mentor and student. Mentors were expected to build a relationship based on mutual respect and trust and to work with students' families to nurture the students' potential. As one mentor said, there was no "magic formula" to mentoring.

### *Constant Emphasis on Academics*

"A constant emphasis on academic skills reinforces the commitment of all parties – students, mentors and staff – to the primary goal of increasing college attendance," noted the evaluator.

### *Sustainable Growth*

The evaluator believed that, in any community, only a limited number of adults were capable of establishing effective mentor relationships. "A program should not sacrifice quality – and potentially significant impacts – for quantity in number of participants," the evaluator noted.

### *Family Support and Student Motivation*

Although students from families that provided strong support – independent of SAS participation – did significantly better than others on a number of outcome measures, SAS participation significantly improved outcomes among students whose families provided low and moderate levels of support. Evaluators found that SAS similarly benefited students with the lowest levels of motivation and the lowest GPAs as they entered the SAS program.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted over a 4-year period, from 1993 to 1997 and included four cohorts of Sponsor-A-Scholar students (high school graduating classes of 1994 through 1997). The comparison group was selected by matching each SAS participant with two non-SAS students of the same race, gender and school attended. The comparison group was also matched for academic achievement by selecting the two demographically comparable students whose GPAs were closest (one higher, one lower) to that of the matched SAS student. Two variables on which students could not be matched were income eligibility and motivation for pursuing a college career. Given the high percentage of students from low-income families in the city's public schools, the evaluator explained, there is a high likelihood that most comparison students also fit the SAS program income criteria.

## EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

The evaluation was funded by The Commonwealth Fund. SAS is funded and operated by the nonprofit organization,

Philadelphia Futures, the education affiliate of the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition. The annual operating cost of SAS was estimated at \$365,429.

## GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

SAS serves the Philadelphia public schools.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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