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Dear Project Director:

We are delighted to be able to make this fact sheet available to you to help you make your mentoring program a success. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools under contract with EMT Associates, Inc. Although this publication has not yet been officially released by the U.S. Department of Education, we have been authorized to make it available on the Web at this time to solicit your feedback.

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Sincerely,

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MENTORING FACT SHEET

U.S. Department of Education ■ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Mentoring Resource Center

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Peer Mentoring and Academic Success

Peer programs of all kinds are increasing in both school and community settings across the United States, offering new opportunities for young people to be engaged in meaningful service to others. This trend is particularly apparent in the field of mentoring. In a recent interview for the *NMC Bulletin* (July 2005), Dr. Michael Karcher speculated that “within a decade, cross-age peer mentoring will constitute half of all mentoring matches in the country,” a comment that is supported by examples from the field. In 2003, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America reported that high school Bigs made up over one-third of the total number of BBBS matches, and that number is increasing annually.

The growing popularity of these programs can be attributed to a number of factors, including:

- An increased national emphasis on community service and volunteerism by young people.
- The emergence of positive youth development as a significant set of principles in working with at-risk youth.
- An increased need for support in schools to overcome youth violence, negative peer pressure, educational failure, and other problems.

For ED Mentoring grantees, peer—or cross-age—mentoring may provide a powerful opportunity to harness the natural influence that young people have on each other, turning it into a positive experience for both mentor and mentee. The model may be especially appealing to ED Mentoring programs for several reasons:

- Peer mentoring programs, in both school and community settings, often focus on helping participants improve academically and become more connected to school—two important outcomes for ED Mentoring programs.
- Volunteer recruitment is simplified and draws on a relatively untapped (and easily located) population—older teens who have an interest in helping their younger peers.
- Training mentors, monitoring match activities, and providing close supervision can be much easier in the controlled environment of the school setting.
- The youth development approach benefits both participants in the match, and programs working with a broad age range—e.g., fourth- through eighth-graders—may be able to serve both ends of the age spectrum through cross-age matches.
- Peer mentoring services that are integrated into school programs may have greater potential for long-term sustainability as teachers, counselors, and administrators see positive outcomes on academic and social development.

Some ED mentoring programs are already implementing a peer mentoring model, while others may be thinking about adding this approach as an additional component to their existing programs. Before implementing peer mentoring services, programs should have defined what their peer mentoring model will include and have a good understanding of the best practices and typical outcomes suggested by research.

What exactly is peer mentoring?

There are many different models that involve youth helping younger youth. Each has its own primary purpose and focus, but there is a tendency for people to interchange the terms when discussing peer programs in general. The term “peer helping programs” refers to the broad category of programs involving youth serving youth. Recently, the term “cross-age” has been used to describe peer programs in which the peer helper is older than the student being helped. Peer/cross-age models include:

- **Peer/Cross-Age Conflict Resolution/Mediation.** Students assist peers in resolving conflicts that might lead to violence or disruption of a school’s instructional program.
- **Peer/Cross-Age Counseling.** Students provide short-term help and support to other students as needed, usually in such areas as personal or social problems.
- **Peer/Cross-Age Tutoring.** Students provide academic help for students needing extra support, most often in one-to-one relationships between tutor and tutee, with a wide range of length and frequency of involvement.
- **Peer/Cross-Age Mentoring.** Students develop an encouraging and supportive relationship with other students, usually younger in age, for the primary purpose of providing broad support, guidance, and friendship.

(Definitions taken from California Association of Peer Programs website: http://www.capeer.org/all_about_peer_programs.htm)

Peer/cross-age mentoring is distinct from the other models in the length and intensity of the relationship and the focus on broad, developmental outcomes rather than specific, prescribed outcomes. Dr. Karcher believes that the age difference is critical in building an effective mentoring relationship between peers. He defines peer mentoring as “an interpersonal relationship between

two youth of different ages that reflects a greater degree of hierarchical power imbalance than is typical of a friendship and in which the goal is for the older youth to promote one or more aspects of the younger youth’s development” (Karcher, 2005). As in the traditional adult/youth mentoring model, cross-age peer mentors may find themselves in the role of mediator, counselor, or tutor during the course of the relationship, but the primary role is one of friendship with the goal of guiding the mentee’s personal development.

What the research says

While empirical research on the effectiveness of cross-age mentoring programs is still sparse, recent studies have shown promising results:

The California Association of Peer Programs (CAPP). In 1998, this nonprofit organization received a grant from the California Wellness Foundation to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of peer programs in California’s middle and high schools. Their findings, published in 2001, showed that these programs had a positive impact on peer mentors, the students they served, and the general school population. The study included a variety of peer programs, including both peer tutoring and peer mentoring services. Improvements for both the peer helper and the student receiving the assistance were tracked, offering rare insight into benefits to peer helpers. Outcomes were tracked in the following areas:

- Personal development
- Communication
- Decisionmaking and problem solving
- Conflict resolution/violence prevention

In surveys conducted as part of the evaluation, a significant majority of school administrators and student advisors reported that peer program members (the students in the helping role) improved academically as a result of their involvement in the

program. The younger students served by the programs (the mentees) also tended to improve academically. The study results are available at CAPP's website: http://www.cappeer.org/all_about_peer_programs.htm.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. A 2003–2004 internal study conducted by BBBSA through a grant from the Atlantic Philanthropies examined effective practices in eight school-based Big Brothers Big Sisters programs. A component of the study focused on how outcomes for mentees differed depending on whether their mentor was a high school student, a college student, or a corporate volunteer. The BBBSA study found that Littles matched with high school Bigs, who represented 47 percent of the mentors in the study, showed more improvements in grades than Littles matched with corporate or college-age Bigs. High school Bigs also spent more time with their Littles at each meeting and had the lowest premature closure rate compared to matches using corporate and college-age mentors (Big Brothers Big Sisters, n.d.).

Cross-Age Peer Mentoring and School Connectedness. This research study of a cross-age mentoring program used an experimental design and a randomly assigned control group. It found a positive effect on the mentees' connectedness to school, parents, and their sense of future. The program included curriculum that complemented the mentoring experience and that involved parents in a variety of activities. The research team also found improvements in the academic achievement of mentees, using spelling achievement as a measure. The findings suggested that increased parental involvement also had an effect on the improvements (Karcher, Davis, Powell, 2002).

These studies, and others, indicate that peer mentoring programs can—and do—make a difference in a number of important areas: connectedness to school and parents, improvement in social skills and self-esteem, and academic achievement, and that both mentors and mentees benefit from partic-

ipation in the programs. Though it's not clear whether developmental relationships between mentors and mentees specifically cause academic improvements, it is likely that a developmental approach is more effective than one that is primarily task-focused, since developmental relationships can touch on a broad range of factors that affect academics, such as attitudes, behaviors, and goals.

Implications for Practice

As with any mentoring model, cross-age mentoring requires careful program design and implementation. In addition to adhering to the same standards and best practices that should be in place for any mentoring program, issues such as increased training, supervision, and monitoring of matches will require some special attention. Programs implementing a model using students as mentors should address these key programmatic factors:

- *Plan a program that fits your school and/or community.* Take a look at the strengths and challenges of the schools you serve and shape your program accordingly. Include teachers, administrators, parents, and youth in the planning.
- *Screen peer/cross-age mentors to find those who are most likely to persist.* These are not always the high achievers in the school, but those who have a genuine interest in helping others, are able to be empathetic, and can identify with others.
- *Establish outcomes for both mentees and peer mentors.* Even if one group is the primary focus of your project, measurable objectives for both participants to the match should be identified and tracked.
- *Clearly define and state roles, responsibilities, policies, and procedures to mentors and mentees.* Young people need structure and clear expectations and what may seem obvious to an adult may be unclear to a young person.

- *Build significant support for mentors into the program design, including thorough initial training, ongoing training and monitoring, time for debriefing, and group activities for mentors.* Support should include easy access to staff who can offer advice and provide additional resources if needed.
- *Adapt training materials designed for adult mentors to be more “youth friendly” or locate materials from the many resources available.* Remember that young people may need more direct coaching than adults, and while they have many strengths, they may lack the experience to handle some situations with good judgment.
- *Help peer mentors understand the developmental focus of the mentoring relationship.* Emphasize that they are a role model for younger students and can help their mentee overcome shyness, gain self-esteem, handle difficult social situations, and become more confident. Be sure they know that missed appointments or ending the relationship early can negate the positive work they are doing with mentees.
- *Provide high expectations for your peer mentors and help them follow through with the program’s objectives.* Reinforce responsible behaviors with praise and find ways to publicly recognize their work throughout the school community.

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