



A FUTURE BUILT *on* MENTORSHIP

Why Mentoring is the Essential
Infrastructure our Future Needs Now

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INTRODUCTION

THE FIERCE URGENCY OF INVESTING IN YOUTH MENTORSHIP

Mentorship represents one of the most powerful forms of social infrastructure we can build — human connections that create ripple effects extending far beyond individual relationships.

When a young person gains a mentor, the benefits cascade outward: families grow stronger as youth become more engaged and hopeful; schools see improved attendance and reduced behavioral issues; employers gain better-prepared workers with stronger hard and soft skills; communities experience reduced crime and increased civic participation; and society as a whole becomes more connected across differences of class, race, and background.

Mentorship stands apart from other interventions in its flexibility and accessibility — it can be integrated into existing institutions, adapted to any community context, and implemented without specialized infrastructure. Mentorship can happen in schools, workplaces, faith communities, or neighborhood settings, and it requires little more than a caring adult willing to show up consistently.

Decades of rigorous research demonstrate that quality mentoring relationships transform individual lives, strengthen communities, and drive economic mobility. The Youth Relationships Study, published in 2025 after eight years of research, found that mentored youth consistently outperform their peers across measures of resilience, social connection, and behavioral outcomes. These findings build upon the landmark 1995 Public/Private Ventures randomized control trial, which established causal links between mentoring and reduced substance use, improved school attendance, and better family relationships. More recently, longitudinal research tracking participants into their thirties reveals that mentoring produces lasting economic benefits, including increased college enrollment, higher lifetime earnings, and reduced socioeconomic gaps between mentored youth and their higher-income peers.

Yet, today, we face a growing gap in this fundamental infrastructure. One in three young people in America grows up

without a mentor. The natural mentorship that once happened organically in communities has been disrupted by technology, economic pressures, and social fragmentation. At the very moment when young people need guidance most, millions lack access to a caring adult mentor. This infrastructure gap weakens the connective tissue that holds communities together and limits our collective capacity to address the challenges we face as a society.

This report offers a foundation for understanding mentorship as essential infrastructure needed to move our country, our communities, and our future forward — with a focus on reaching the **10 million youth** experiencing barriers to accessing the critical support they need to thrive. The path forward requires investment in capacity building, employers and schools to facilitate mentoring programs, policymakers to embed mentoring in education and workforce policy, and communities to celebrate mentoring as a civic duty. Above all, it requires all stakeholders to recognize that mentorship represents one of our most direct opportunities to bridge divides, build opportunities, and ensure every young person is guided towards their full potential.

The pages ahead explore the disrupted generation's challenges and opportunities, why mentorship functions as critical infrastructure for human development, the proven ripple effects that transform individuals and communities, concrete strategies for scaling mentorship to unprecedented levels, and specific roles in making this vision reality. Consider this report a strategic playbook — grounded in research, focused on results, and designed for action.

This report offers a foundation for understanding mentorship as essential infrastructure needed to move our country, our communities, and our future forward.

A future where every young person has a mentor is possible. A future where joy, laughter, wisdom, and knowledge are shared broadly across communities and generations. And by investing in this future, we also invest in ourselves — creating the resilient, connected society we all want and deserve.



SECTION 1

THE DISRUPTED GENERATION

The pandemic disrupted education and social development and intensified a series of interconnected crises that now define the experience of growing up in America.

Many communities have become opportunity deserts: places where youth, especially in low-income or geographically isolated areas, have limited access to mentors, career exposure, meaningful experiences, supportive adults, and pathways to economic mobility. This also includes social deserts: lack of networks, relationships, exposure, and beliefs about what's possible.

LITTLE KAYLIN

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

THE CHALLENGE

The mental health crisis among young people has reached unprecedented levels, with indicators of distress spanning every demographic group.

According to the CDC, 40 percent of youth report feeling persistently sad or hopeless. For teen girls, the situation is even more dire: three in four reported persistent sadness in 2021, with more than one in four seriously considering attempting suicide. Among LGBTQ youth, 41 percent seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with transgender, nonbinary, and youth of color reporting even higher rates.

These mental health statistics intersect with educational and economic challenges to create a perfect storm. An estimated 11.6 million children — 16 percent of America’s youth — live in poverty, with stark racial disparities: 30 percent of Black children, 29 percent of American

Indian or Alaska Native children, and 22 percent of Hispanic or Latino children grow up in poverty, compared to 10 percent of non-Hispanic White and 11 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander youth. The pandemic exacerbated these inequalities, with children from low-income families experiencing the most significant learning losses while having the least access to mental health support. Foster youth face particularly acute challenges: approximately 400,000 children are in foster care at any given time, and they experience PTSD at rates nearly double that of U.S. war veterans. These young people often lack the consistent adult relationships that are foundational to emotional wellbeing, making intentional mentorship all the more critical.

Informal mentorship through traditional support systems that once helped young people navigate challenges have become increasingly fragmented. The extended family networks that once offered multiple caring adults have dispersed due to geographic mobility. Neighborhood bonds where adults knew and looked out for each other’s children have weakened. Religious congregations and community organizations that connected generations have seen declining participation. Schools, once hubs of community connection, are overcrowded and underfunded, limiting teachers’ capacity to build deep relationships.

In lieu of these social dynamics and spaces, young people spend an average of seven hours daily on screens, seeking connection in digital spaces that cannot provide the sustained, caring adult relationships they need. The U.S. Surgeon General has declared loneliness a public health crisis, noting that up to one in five young people ages 3 to 17 has a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder.



of youth are persistently sad or hopeless



of young people (ages 3-17) has a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder



Youth spend an average of **7 hours** daily on screens



The U.S. Surgeon General has declared loneliness a public health crisis



THE OPPORTUNITY

Mentorship offers a powerful response to this crisis of mental and emotional wellbeing. In an era when traditional support systems have fragmented and loneliness has become epidemic; mentorship intentionally creates the connections that once occurred organically — connections that research shows are essential for mental health. Mentored youth show a 20 percent reduction in depressive symptoms and 16 percent growth in emotional regulation compared to their non-mentored peers. Where extended family, neighbors, and community institutions once provided multiple caring adults, mentorship intentionally creates these vital connections.

MENTORED YOUTH:



16% growth in emotional regulation



20% reduction in depressive symptoms



of educators report students misbehaving more today than before the pandemic



of teachers report student engagement is lower than in 2019



of students are chronically absent (missing 10%+ of school days)



Chronic absenteeism has **doubled** since the pandemic

EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT

THE CHALLENGE

Since the pandemic, absenteeism has doubled in many districts. For the 2024 to 2025 school year, some districts reported that roughly 22 percent of students missed 10 percent or more of school days.

Students are missing school for reasons that go far beyond motivation, including unstable housing, mental health struggles, transportation gaps, family responsibilities, and feeling disconnected from teachers or peers. For foster youth, frequent placement changes mean they may cycle through multiple schools, neighborhoods, and temporary caregivers, losing connections with each transition.

When a student misses class, they fall behind. But when large numbers of students are chronically absent, entire classrooms slow down, teachers burn out, and the future workforce pipeline weakens. The habits and confidence that drive success in school are the same ones that employers value — reliability, focus, and teamwork. Yet nearly 46 percent of teachers report that student engagement is lower than in 2019. Re-engaging students through caring relationships and supportive school climates isn't just an education issue — it's an economic one.

At the same time, schools are struggling with rising behavior challenges. In a 2025 EdWeek survey, 70 percent of educators reported that students are misbehaving more than before the pandemic, and 80 percent said they need more support to manage those behaviors and rebuild a positive school climate. These are not isolated issues — behavior, attendance, and engagement are intertwined. Students who act out often express frustration, fear, or unmet needs. Bullying, classroom disruptions, and chronic defiance often signal the need for emotional support, not discipline alone.



THE OPPORTUNITY

Teachers cannot solve this crisis alone. With overcrowded classrooms and mounting pressures, even the most dedicated educators lack the capacity to provide every student with the individualized attention and relationship they need. Mentorship fills this gap by bringing additional caring adults into students' lives — adults who can focus on connection, encouragement, and support rather than curriculum and discipline. Strong connections with both peers and caring adults not only motivate students but also help teachers notice when someone is struggling and step in with support before problems grow. The impact is measurable: mentored students attend school more regularly, perform better academically, and exhibit fewer behavioral problems. By expanding the web of supportive relationships around each student, mentorship helps schools address the relationship deficit at the heart of today's educational challenges.

MENTORED STUDENTS:



attend school more regularly



perform better academically



exhibit fewer behavioral problems

ECONOMIC MOBILITY

THE CHALLENGE

The economic landscape and workforce that young people will soon enter has also fundamentally changed.

More than 75 percent of youth express concerns about whether they have the skills necessary to secure employment. Gen Z reports the lowest career confidence on record, with 74 percent of young adults lacking access to a mentor who could help them navigate the transition from education to workforce. The gap between what young people need to succeed and what they have access to continues to widen.

The challenge extends beyond technical skills to what economists' call "social capital" — the networks, relationships, and insider knowledge that open doors to opportunity. Young people from low-income backgrounds often lack exposure to professional careers and the informal guidance that middle- and upper-income youth take for granted: how to write a resume, navigate an interview, understand workplace norms, or even envision career possibilities beyond their immediate experience. Without access to adults in professional roles, entire career pathways remain invisible.

The "soft skills" employers consistently cite as their biggest hiring challenge — communication, reliability, emotional intelligence, adaptability — are precisely the capabilities developed through sustained relationships with caring adults. Yet as traditional mentorship pathways have eroded, fewer young people have access to the guidance that builds these essential workforce competencies.



of youth are concerned about having necessary employment skills



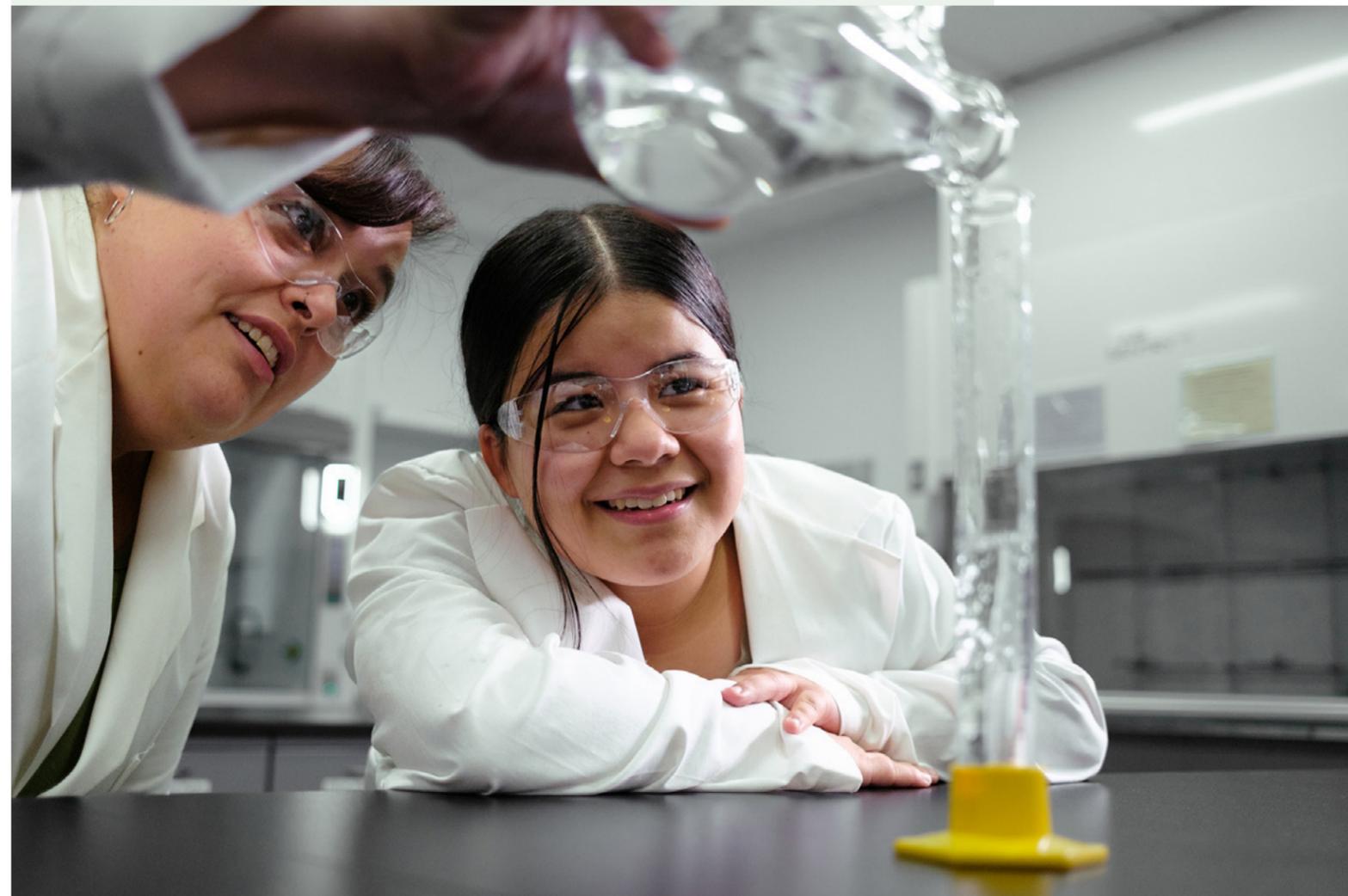
of young adults lack access to a mentor



children (16% of America's youth) live in poverty



Gen Z reports the lowest career confidence on record



THE OPPORTUNITY

Mentorship directly addresses this economic mobility crisis by providing both the social capital and the relational foundation young people need to succeed. Seventy-three percent of mentored youth report that their mentor introduced them to interesting careers — exposure that proves transformative for first-generation college students and youth from communities with limited professional networks. Mentored youth earn an average of \$200,000 more over their lifetimes compared to non-mentored peers, are 20 percent more likely to enroll in college, and enter the workforce with stronger networks and greater confidence. By connecting young people with caring adults who can open doors, model professional behavior, and provide guidance through transitions, mentorship builds the bridges to economic opportunity that no amount of job training alone can create.

MENTORED YOUTH:

▲
earn an average of **\$200,000 more** in lifetime earnings than non-mentored peers

▼
are **20% more likely** to enroll in college

POSITIVE BEHAVIORS AND DEVELOPMENT

THE CHALLENGE

Young people who lack positive adult guidance face a significantly higher risk of entering the justice system — a trajectory with cascading consequences for their futures, their families, and their communities.

Youth involved in the justice system face diminished educational prospects, limited employment opportunities, and cycles of poverty that extend across generations. When no one is modeling positive behavior, providing accountability, or demonstrating that someone cares about their choices, young people operate without the guardrails that mentorship naturally provides.

Substance use and behavioral problems often serve as early warning signs of justice system involvement. Youth who begin using alcohol or drugs in adolescence are significantly more likely to develop dependencies, drop out of school, and eventually face legal consequences. Similarly, patterns of aggressive behavior, chronic rule-breaking, and association with delinquent peers create trajectories toward more serious offenses. Without caring adults to notice these warning signs and intervene early, behavioral problems that could be redirected, instead escalate.

MENTORED YOUTH:

46%

less likely to begin using illegal drugs

27%

less likely to begin using alcohol

54%

less likely to be arrested

52%

less likely to skip school



THE OPPORTUNITY

The connection between mentorship and positive behaviors is clear and causal. Research demonstrates that mentored youth are 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, and 54 percent less likely to have been arrested compared to their non-mentored peers. These outcomes reflect mentorship’s preventive power: by providing consistent positive relationships, clear behavioral modeling, and a sense of belonging, mentorship addresses the disconnection and lack of guidance that often precede justice involvement.

The impact extends beyond individual youth to entire communities. Areas with robust mentoring programs report lower youth crime rates, reduced gang involvement, and stronger community cohesion. By investing in mentorship, we invest in prevention — keeping young people on positive pathways rather than spending exponentially more to address the consequences of justice involvement.

THE OPPORTUNITY THAT CUTS ACROSS CRISES

The interconnected nature of the challenges facing young people means that interventions addressing one of the root causes — a lack of caring adult relationships — can produce cascading benefits across multiple domains simultaneously. This is precisely what makes mentorship so powerful: it doesn’t just improve one outcome, it transforms trajectories.

Decades of research demonstrate that strong mentoring relationships address mental health, educational achievement, workforce readiness, and behavioral outcomes through a single mechanism: consistent human connection. When young people have caring adults in their lives, isolation diminishes, engagement increases, confidence builds, and positive choices become more likely. Each improvement reinforces the others, creating upward spirals rather than downward trajectories.



SECTION 2

MENTORSHIP AS ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

LITTLE MICHAEL

REDEFINING WHAT WE MEAN BY INFRASTRUCTURE

When we think of infrastructure, we typically envision roads, bridges, and broadband networks: the physical systems that enable commerce and communication. But in an economy increasingly driven by human capital, social capital, and emotional intelligence, we must expand our definition.

Just as we've come to recognize early childhood education as critical developmental infrastructure, rather than simply childcare, we must recognize mentorship as essential social infrastructure for human development and economic competitiveness.

Economic connectedness — the relationships between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds — is the strongest predictor of upward economic mobility. Harvard economist Raj Chetty's research demonstrates that children who grow up in communities with greater economic connectedness are significantly more likely to rise out of poverty. Yet "friendship bias" — the tendency for people to form friendships primarily with others of similar socioeconomic status — and economic segregation create barriers to these vital connections. Mentorship directly addresses this gap, creating intentional relationships that bridge economic, racial, and geographic divides.

We have decades of evidence demonstrating what works in youth mentorship. Organizations across the country have spent more than a century refining approaches that produce consistent, measurable outcomes. Programs serve hundreds of thousands of young people, families, and mentors annually through agencies in thousands of communities across all 50 states. This is proven infrastructure that already exists but remains dramatically underutilized and underfunded. While we spend billions on educational technology, workforce training, and mental health treatment, we underinvest in the simple human connections that make all other interventions more effective.

The beauty of mentorship lies in its simplicity and accessibility. You don't need an advanced degree to be a mentor. You don't need special training or exceptional skills. You just need to show up consistently for a young person, sharing everyday activities like playing sports, doing homework, or simply talking about life. Research notes that mentorship programs "focus less on specific problems after they occur, and more on meeting youths' most basic developmental needs." This preventive approach costs much less than remedial interventions while producing far better outcomes.



THE COMPOUNDING IMPACT OF HUMAN CONNECTION

What makes mentorship particularly powerful as an infrastructure investment is its ability to address multiple challenges simultaneously. A single mentoring relationship can impact mental health, educational achievement, workforce readiness, and social capital. This is a direct reflection of the interconnected nature of human development and the central role that relationships play in shaping outcomes.

Our current approach to mental health emphasizes instituting treatment after a crisis, spending billions on therapeutic interventions while investing almost nothing in prevention through connection. Yet outcome data shows that mentoring consistently reduces depressive symptoms and anxiety. Young people in mentoring programs report a 20 percent reduction in depressive symptoms and show 16 percent growth in effectiveness at regulating emotions. They score higher on measures of grit, coping efficacy, and hopeful future expectations than non-participants. These improvements emerge naturally from consistent, caring relationships.

Meanwhile, employers consistently report that their biggest challenge isn't finding workers with technical skills but finding workers who are engaged, reliable, and able to build relationships. These "soft skills" — better understood as essential human capabilities — are precisely what mentorship develops. Youth in mentoring programs demonstrate 18 percent growth in social competence, score higher in self-control, and report less aggressive behavior than non-participants. Mentorship models and develops the skills employers seek most: how to navigate relationships, manage emotions, and persist through challenges.

For communities, mentorship creates understanding and connection, serving as social glue. Eighty-three percent of mentors report that being matched with their mentee helped them learn about and appreciate different cultural backgrounds. In an era of increasing polarization and segregation, mentoring relationships create critical bridges.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE THAT STANDS THE TEST OF CRISIS

The Youth Relationships Study deserves special attention, as it represents the most rigorous contemporary validation of mentorship's infrastructure role. The study's design — randomizing 1,011 youth to immediate mentoring versus 342 to a control group — provides causal evidence during a period of unprecedented social disruption: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study measured multiple protective factors that function as a psychological infrastructure for navigating challenges. Mentored youth consistently outperformed controls across every measure, demonstrating that mentorship builds the internal resources young people need to thrive despite adversity. Unlike targeted interventions that address single issues, mentorship simultaneously impacts mental health, behavioral outcomes, academic engagement, and social connections.

That these effects emerged during COVID-19 demonstrates mentorship's role as essential infrastructure. While other support systems collapsed, mentoring relationships adapted and continued providing critical connection.

While we spend billions on educational technology, workforce training, and mental health treatment, we underinvest in the simple human connections that make all other interventions more effective.



SECTION 3

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

LITTLE JAI & BIG CAMPBELL

HOW INDIVIDUAL CONNECTIONS BUILD SOCIETAL INFRASTRUCTURE



Just as a single bridge connecting two previously isolated communities can transform an entire region's economy, individual mentoring relationships create ripple effects that extend far beyond the mentor and mentee.

When we invest in one young person through mentorship, we build connective tissue that strengthens families and revitalizes communities. This is infrastructure at work: creating pathways where none existed, building bridges across divides, and establishing networks through which resources, knowledge, and opportunity flow.

Mentorship functions as social infrastructure precisely because its benefits compound and spread. A mentored youth who avoids the criminal justice system doesn't just improve their own trajectory — they remain

present for their siblings, contribute to their community's safety, and eventually become mentors themselves. A young person who increases their lifetime earnings through mentorship doesn't pocket that value in isolation — they support extended family, invest in local businesses, and generate tax revenue that funds public goods.

Mentorship functions as social infrastructure precisely because its benefits compound and spread.

What follows is evidence of how these ripples spread, from individual transformation to mentor benefits to community-wide change, each level reinforcing the others.

1 TRANSFORMING INDIVIDUAL LIVES

The power of mentorship becomes most vivid in individual stories, though aggregate data confirms what these stories suggest: mentorship fundamentally alters life trajectories. Eighty-two percent of alumni mentees from Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) report that being matched with their mentor changed their perspective on what was possible in life. This shift in perspective represents a breakthrough in how young people understand their place in the world and their capacity to shape their futures.

The benefits extend across multiple domains. 2024 data shows that 86 percent of youth experience reduced depressive symptoms when mentored, and 91 percent of Littles feel an increase in their sense of belonging amidst family and peers.

MENTORED YOUTH:

91%

feel an increased sense of belonging

95%

plan to graduate from high school

Academically, 95 percent of mentees plan to graduate from high school, with the majority planning to attend college — a dramatic shift from baseline expectations, particularly for youth from low-income backgrounds where college attendance has historically been low. The academic improvements are concrete and measurable: mentored youth show a 28 percent increase in "A" grades and a 17 percent decline in "D" and "F" grades. School discipline issues and bullying behavior decline significantly with longer match length.

The impact extends beyond academia: Seventy-three percent of alumni mentees report that their mentor introduced them to interesting careers — exposure that proves critical for first-generation college students and youth from communities with limited professional networks. Mentors also provide windows into worlds that many young people from low-income communities often don't get to see. Eighty-six percent of alumni mentees say their mentor provided opportunities and new experiences they wouldn't have had otherwise. The long-term economic impacts validate the importance of these early experiences. Mentored youth earn an average of \$200,000 more over their lifetimes than those who didn't participate in the program. This increased earning power strengthens families, communities, and the broader economy.

CASE STUDY

FROM LITTLE TO BIG: THE INTERGENERATIONAL POWER OF MENTORSHIP

Behind every data point is a human story — and few illustrate mentorship’s ripple effects more powerfully than Allen Arseneau’s. Growing up in inner-city Boston, Allen faced the compounding challenges that define opportunity deserts: poverty severe enough that “even the other poor kids made fun of us,” household instability, and the ever-present threat of violence. But at nine years old, Allen was matched with his Big Brother, Paul — a relationship that would span more than three decades and fundamentally alter his trajectory.

“Paul became a light, flickering in my pretty dark world,” Allen recalls. The activities themselves were ordinary — making cookies, bowling, visiting museums — but Paul’s consistency was transformative. When Allen was thrown out of his home at sixteen years old after speaking out against criminal activity in his household, his mentor continued to show up. When Allen needed guidance about school, college, and career, Paul provided it. “He nudged me — over and over — in the right direction.”

Those nudges cultivated measurable outcomes: Allen graduated high school with honors, earned a degree in chemical engineering from Northeastern University with additional studies in biochemistry, and became one of only a handful of Northeastern graduates ever accepted to Stanford Business School. Today, he serves as the co-founder of a mission-driven company with his wife. And to Allen’s children, his mentor is “Grandpa Paul.”

Allen’s story demonstrates something the research consistently shows: mentorship creates cascading benefits that extend beyond individual transformation. After 15 years of contemplating whether he could be as impactful for someone else as Paul was



Paul became a light, flickering in my pretty dark world. He nudged me — over and over — in the right direction.



▼ **LITTLE BRAYLON, BIG ALLEN & “GRANDPA PAUL”**

for him, Allen became a Big Brother himself. His Little Brother, Braylon, was seven when they matched — the same age Allen had been when he first needed someone to show up for him. When Braylon’s mother passed away at just 34, the family made the same life-changing call that Allen’s mother had made decades earlier. Today, every sibling in Braylon’s family has a Big Brother or Big Sister. Nine years into their match, Braylon — now a young man — told Allen: “When I grow up, I want to go to college and study engineering and be an inventor — just like you.”

Allen still considers himself a Little — 27 years and counting. And now he is also a Big, offering the same steady guidance that once helped him defy the odds. His story is proof of what the research confirms: mentorship creates ripple effects that transform families, communities, and generations.

“The impact of Big Brothers Big Sisters is real,” Allen says. “It changed my life. It changed Braylon’s life. It’s changing entire families. And it’s changing the world.”

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

2 THE RECIPROCAL IMPACT ON MENTORS

While programs focus on youth outcomes, research reveals that mentors often benefit as much as or more than their mentees. Mentors develop patience, empathy, and cultural competence. They rediscover joy and playfulness often lost in adult life. Seventy-six percent of mentors report improved self-esteem and sense of purpose. Ninety percent of alumni mentors report that their mentee made more impact on their life than they did on their mentee’s — a reflection of the profound reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships.

For employers, these benefits translate directly to the bottom line. Employees who serve as mentors show higher engagement, lower turnover, and improved leadership skills. Companies

with workplace mentoring programs report that participating employees are 49 percent less likely to leave, saving an average of \$3,000 per participant annually in reduced turnover costs. Mentors develop coaching skills, cross-cultural competence, and emotional intelligence: capabilities that enhance their professional effectiveness.

Adults who have served as mentors are also more likely to remain civically engaged, volunteering at higher rates even five to 10 years after their formal mentoring relationship ends. Mentorship develops engaged citizens across America. They vote more frequently, participate in community organizations, and contribute to charitable causes.

MENTORS:

- ▲ higher engagement at work and improved leadership skills
- ▲ increased cross-cultural competence and emotional intelligence
- ▲ more civically engaged

3 BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

The aggregate effect of thousands of mentoring relationships transforms entire communities. Mentoring closes two-thirds of the socioeconomic gap for participants. As adults, mentees’ incomes more closely resemble those of their mentors than those of their own families.

Communities with strong mentoring programs see reduced crime rates, improved school performance, and increased civic engagement. The economic returns are substantial: every \$1 invested in mentoring returns \$3 in public benefit through reduced spending on criminal justice, social services, and remedial education. More

than that, communities with robust mentoring programs report stronger social cohesion, greater trust across differences, and more optimism about the future.

The intergenerational healing that mentorship facilitates proves particularly powerful in communities that have experienced historical trauma or persistent poverty. When young people see adults who look like them succeeding, build cross-cultural relationships, and receive consistent care from mentors outside their families, it challenges narratives of limitation and opens new possibilities.

Every \$1 invested in mentoring returns \$3 in public benefit through reduced spending on criminal justice, social services, and remedial education.



SECTION 4

THE VISION: MENTORSHIP AT SCALE

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?

The vision is ambitious but achievable: ensuring every young person who needs a mentor has one. This would mean building mentorship infrastructure to reach 10 million youth — a dramatic expansion from current capacity, but one commensurate with the need. Achieving this goal requires fundamental shifts in how we think about and invest in mentorship.



MENTORSHIP AT SCALE CAN BE REALIZED THROUGH FOUR PARALLEL STRATEGIES:

1 ACCELERATE PROVEN PROGRAMS

Scale evidence-based mentorship models to reach millions more youth, ensuring equitable access across underserved communities. This means embedding mentoring in at least 1,000 schools nationwide through school-based programs that provide consistent access and reduce transportation barriers. Programs like High School Bigs, where older students mentor younger ones, create cascading benefits while building leadership skills in teen mentors.

It also means making workplace mentoring as standard as 401(k) plans. Two-thirds of young adults already say they would choose an employer offering mentoring over one that doesn't. Companies are discovering that workplace mentoring programs address multiple challenges simultaneously: building talent pipelines, improving employee engagement, and demonstrating community commitment. Big Brothers Big Sisters' Beyond School Walls program provides a proven model, bringing youth directly into workplaces where they build relationships with professional mentors while gaining career exposure.

2 ADVANCE PRO-MENTORING POLICIES

Advocate for systemic changes that prioritize youth development, dismantling barriers to opportunity. Our ability to serve youth and families effectively is deeply influenced by the policies and systems that shape their daily lives. We must strengthen our advocacy efforts at the federal, state, and local levels by championing policies that expand access to mentorship and increase funding to BBBS programs that address socioeconomic gaps. By influencing public policy, we can create lasting change that benefits entire communities.

3 EXPAND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Build a coalition of businesses, organizations, and community leaders united in support of youth empowerment. Reaching every young person requires meeting them where they are—in their communities, through approaches that honor their cultural identities and lived experiences. This means expanding beyond traditional one-to-one matching to include mentoring models designed specifically for underserved populations: culturally specific programs led by mentors who share young people's backgrounds and understand their challenges; faith-based mentoring that leverages existing community trust and infrastructure; group mentoring that builds peer support alongside adult guidance; and virtual mentoring that reaches rural communities and youth facing transportation or mobility barriers. Organizations like Latino mentoring programs, Black male mentoring initiatives, and Indigenous youth programs demonstrate how culturally grounded approaches achieve stronger engagement and outcomes.

4 ELEVATE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Inspire a national movement that recognizes mentorship as a critical driver of personal and societal growth. Scaling mentorship demands a cultural shift—making mentoring as expected and celebrated as other forms of civic engagement. This means storytelling that highlights not just need but impact and joy, shifting the narrative from “troubled youth need help” to “all young people deserve guides, and mentoring enriches everyone involved.”

CASE STUDY

LEVEL UP: TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS THROUGH INNOVATIVE EMBEDDED MENTORING

When Metro Atlanta community leaders requested a mentor for every middle school student, Big Brothers Big Sisters responded with **Level Up** — an innovative program placing paid mentors directly within schools to support students with social-emotional growth and academic success during the school day.

Launched in fall 2023, Level Up's results address precisely the challenges facing today's schools.

Among 1,300 students served in 2024–25:

- 89% showed improved emotional regulation
- 83% had decreased or no depressive symptoms
- 88% maintained or improved behavior

Three of four Atlanta middle schools showed significant attendance gains (1.7% to 8%), and Russell Middle School's suspension rate dropped from 4.02% to 1.87% after two years.

The model has expanded to eight additional BBBS agencies nationwide, serving more than 2,000 youth in just two years — proof that mentorship can be embedded in schools at scale. Level Up demonstrates that by bringing caring adults focused on relationship-building into schools, embedded mentoring addresses the connection deficit underlying today's attendance, engagement, and behavioral challenges.

INVESTMENT FRAMEWORK

Achieving mentorship at scale requires investment, which offers proven returns.

The funding model should blend public and private resources. Government investment makes sense given the public benefits, such as reduced crime, improved educational outcomes, and increased tax revenue from higher-earning workers. Private sector engagement is equally critical. Companies benefit directly from better-prepared workers and more stable communities. Philanthropic investment in mentorship creates lasting change rather than temporary relief.

At approximately \$2,500 to \$3,500 per youth annually, mentorship programs pay for themselves within seven years through increased tax revenue from participants' 15 percent higher lifetime earnings. When we factor in reduced spending on criminal justice, special education, and social services, the return on investment accelerates further.

THE BUSINESS CASE: WHY EXECUTIVES SHOULD CARE ABOUT MENTORSHIP

Companies investing in youth mentoring see concrete returns:



of youth are concerned about having necessary employment skills.

▶ Mentorship addresses the talent pipeline crisis at its source.



of young adults report they would choose an employer offering mentoring over one that doesn't.



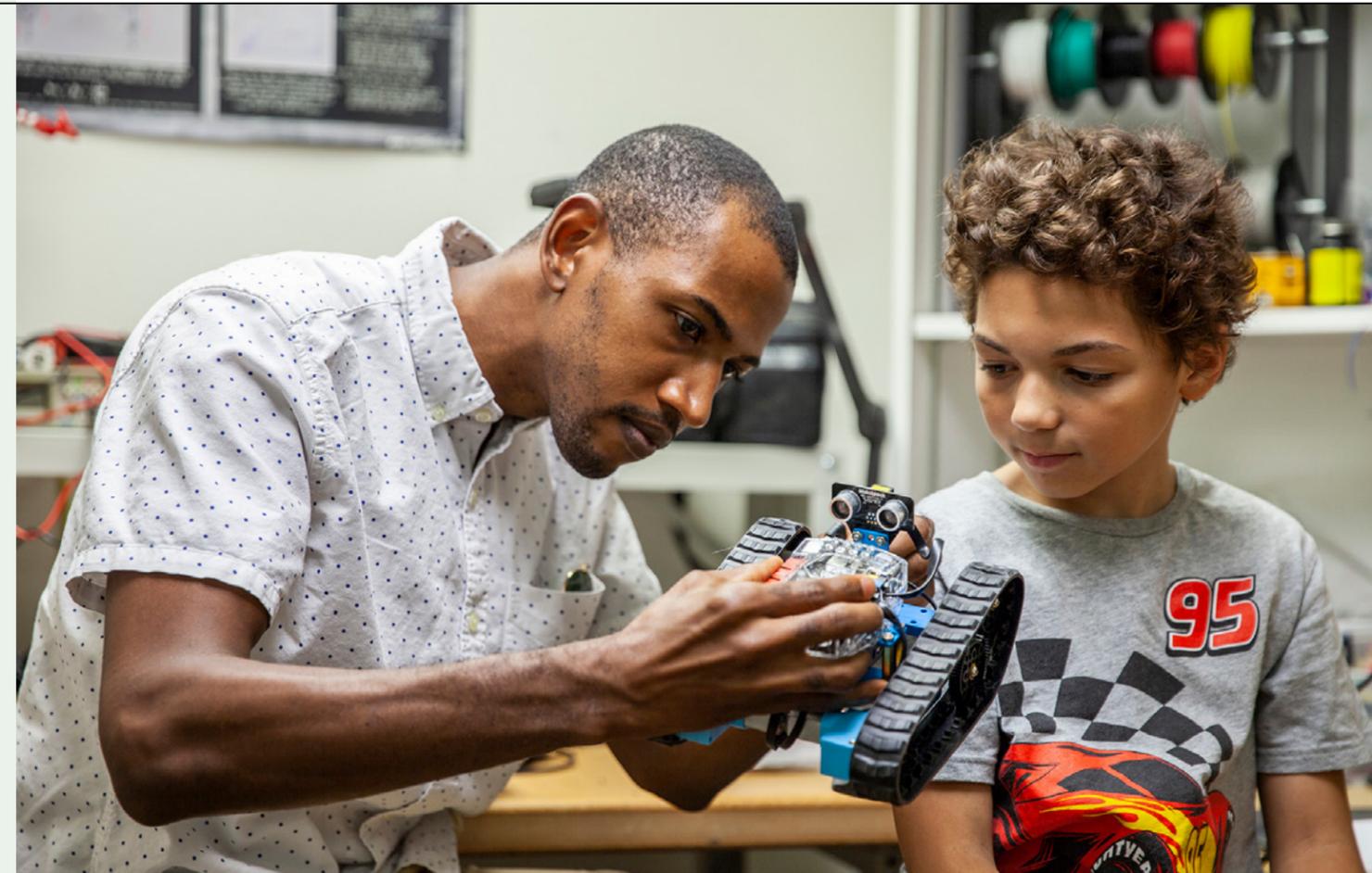
among employees who serve as mentors.

▶ Saving organizations \$3,000 per participant annually.



for youth who participate in mentorship programs.

▶ Tax revenues from higher earnings help offset program costs within just 7 years.



BUILDING THE MOVEMENT

Scaling mentorship demands a cultural shift. We must make mentoring as expected and celebrated as other forms of civic engagement by constructing the social norms, systems, and narratives that make mentorship an expected part of community infrastructure. This means storytelling that highlights not just need but impact and joy. The narrative must shift from "troubled youth need help" to "all young people deserve guides, and mentoring enriches everyone involved."

Grassroots organizing, corporate leadership, and celebrity/influencer engagement all play roles. When professional athletes, business leaders, and cultural icons share their mentoring stories — either as mentors or as young people who benefited from mentoring — it normalizes and elevates the practice. When companies make mentoring part of their corporate culture, schools celebrate mentors alongside teachers, and communities recognize mentoring as an essential civic contribution, we begin to build the movement necessary for scale.

Technology can accelerate expansion without replacing human connection. Digital platforms can streamline volunteer recruitment, training, and matching. Virtual mentoring can reach rural communities and youth facing transportation barriers. Data systems can track outcomes and enable continuous improvement. Ultimately, technology as an aid for scaling mentorship serves the human relationship, not the other way around.

The narrative must shift from "troubled youth need help" to "all young people deserve guides, and mentoring enriches everyone involved."



SECTION 5

THE CALL TO ACTION

LITTLE TALIAH & BIG AUDREY

THIS IS THE MOMENT FOR MENTORSHIP

The confluence of crises facing young people — mental health challenges, educational disruption, economic uncertainty, social isolation — demands a comprehensive response.



▼ BIG SHELDON & LITTLE ALVIN

Yet our current approaches remain fragmented, addressing symptoms rather than the underlying causes. We spend billions on mental health treatment while investing almost nothing in prevention through connection. We fund workforce training programs that fail because participants lack the social capital to access opportunities. We lament educational achievement gaps while ignoring the relationship gaps that underlie them.

Mentorship addresses all these challenges simultaneously because it builds the fundamental social infrastructure upon which everything else depends: human connection. When young people have consistent, caring adults in their lives, mental health improves, educational engagement increases, and career prospects brighten. This is demonstrated repeatedly across decades of research and across thousands of mentorship relationships.

The moment demands urgency. Today's youth will enter the workforce in a world transformed by artificial intelligence, climate change, and technological disruption. The human capabilities that mentoring develops — emotional intelligence, relationship building, adaptability, resilience — will prove even more critical as automation eliminates routine work. Through mentorship, we're preparing young people for a future where distinctly human capabilities provide competitive advantage.

Mentorship builds the fundamental social infrastructure upon which everything else depends: human connection.

A ROLE FOR EVERYONE

CORPORATE

The workforce challenges you face — lack of engagement, inadequate soft skills, high turnover — have roots in youth disconnection. Mentoring represents upstream investment in your future workforce. But the benefits extend beyond the talent pipeline. Employees who mentor show higher engagement and lower turnover. Companies with strong mentoring programs attract purpose-driven workers. Communities with robust mentoring have lower crime, better schools, and greater economic vitality — all factors that benefit business. Make mentoring part of your corporate culture, not just your corporate social responsibility.

Tangible actions you can take include:

- ✔ **Launching workplace mentoring programs:** Partner with organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters to bring youth into your workplace through programs like Beyond School Walls, where employees mentor during work hours while youth gain career exposure.
- ✔ **Providing paid volunteer time:** Offer employees 2-4 hours monthly of paid time to mentor, signaling that this work matters to your organization.
- ✔ **Celebrating employee mentors publicly:** Feature mentor stories in internal communications, recognize mentors at company events, and include mentoring participation in performance reviews.
- ✔ **Making mentoring part of your EVP:** Include workplace mentoring in your employee value proposition and recruitment materials — two-thirds of young adults say they'd choose an employer offering mentoring over one that doesn't.



▼ WORKPLACE MENTORING AT BBBS NYC

- ✔ **Providing financial support:** Make corporate contributions to local mentorship agencies, sponsor mentoring events, or establish employee giving campaigns that match staff donations.
- ✔ **Engaging your C-suite:** Have senior leaders serve as mentors and champions, demonstrating organizational commitment from the top.
- ✔ **Tracking and reporting impact:** Measure employee satisfaction, retention rates, and skill development among mentors, then share these metrics with stakeholders.
- ✔ **Opening your doors for career exposure:** Host site visits, provide job shadowing opportunities, and invite youth to experience your workplace culture.



CASE STUDY

POLICY IN ACTION: MARYLAND'S EVIDENCE-BASED INVESTMENT IN MENTORSHIP

What does it look like when policymakers treat mentorship as essential infrastructure? Maryland offers a compelling model.

In September 2025, Governor Wes Moore and Arnold Ventures announced \$20 million in grant awards through the Maryland Partnership for Proven Programs — an evidence-based partnership that has now invested \$40 million in proven youth development and economic mobility initiatives. “Leaders often talk about money spent on a program, but they rarely talk about how well that program worked,” notes Arnold Ventures Co-Founder Laura Arnold. “We are changing the conversation.”

Of the \$20 million, \$5.6 million was directed to Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliates in collaboration with the Department of Juvenile Services and the Governor’s Office for Children — addressing a critical gap of hundreds of Maryland youth waiting to be matched with mentors. **The funding will enable BBBS to reach an additional 1,000 young people across nine counties over four years.**

The Maryland model demonstrates that when state government, philanthropy, and youth-serving organizations align around evidence-based approaches, mentorship infrastructure can be built at scale — not as a nice-to-have program, but as essential infrastructure for youth development.

POLICY

The evidence for the benefits of mentorship demands a commensurate policy response. Mentoring should be embedded in policies that focus on youth workforce development strategy, mental health initiatives, chronic absenteeism, and violence prevention efforts. Policymakers at all levels of government can help to expand mentorship by allocating funding for mentoring activities in workforce, juvenile justice, education, and mental health related government grants.

Tangible actions you can take include:

- ✓ **Support existing and new mentorship resources:** Expand and establish funding so that mentoring organizations can grow their one-to-one and group mentoring programs to serve more youth.
- ✓ **Expand mentoring in schools:** Encourage schools to utilize their educational federal resources to incorporate mentorship into their strategies to improve their school environment and reduce absenteeism.
- ✓ **Integrate mentorship in youth mental health policy solutions:** Give mentoring organizations the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process around how their community responds to the mental health needs of local youth.
- ✓ **Support workforce development pathways:** Enhance eligibility under youth workforce development programs to reach youth at an earlier age to develop their soft skills.
- ✓ **Champion mentoring publicly:** Use your platform to share mentoring stories, recognize mentors in your district or state, and elevate mentoring as a priority in your policy conversations.



▶ BIG ASHLEY & LITTLE ABBIE

EDUCATION

Schools with mentoring programs see improved attendance, fewer disciplinary problems, and better academic outcomes — yet most schools lack structured mentoring. Academic success is built upon the social and emotional foundation that mentoring provides.

Tangible actions you can take include:

- ✓ **Partnering with established organizations:** Contact your local mentorship agencies to explore school-based mentoring programs that provide training, matching, and ongoing support.
- ✓ **Designating a mentoring liaison:** Assign a staff member (counselor, social worker, or administrator) to coordinate with mentoring organizations and support relationships.
- ✓ **Creating space and time:** Allocate physical space for mentoring meetings and flexible scheduling that allows mentors to visit during school hours without disrupting instruction.
- ✓ **Identifying students who would benefit:** Train staff to recognize students who need additional support and facilitate referrals to mentoring programs.
- ✓ **Implementing peer mentoring:** Launch programs like High School Bigs where older students mentor younger ones, building leadership skills while expanding reach.
- ✓ **Celebrating mentors alongside teachers:** Recognize mentors at school events, feature mentor-mentee pairs in newsletters, and thank volunteers publicly for their contributions.
- ✓ **Providing mentor feedback:** Create communication channels so mentors know how youth are progressing academically and behaviorally, enabling coordinated support.
- ✓ **Advocating within your district:** Encourage district leadership to prioritize mentoring, allocate funding, and embed programs across multiple schools.

COMMUNITY

Your voice and platform can transform mentoring from nice-to-have to must-have in your community. Demand mentoring access as you would quality schools or safe streets — necessities for all young people.

Tangible actions you can take include:

- ✔ **Convening stakeholders:** Bring together schools, businesses, faith communities, nonprofits, and civic organizations to build a collaborative mentoring ecosystem in your community.
- ✔ **Supporting local agencies:** Provide financial support to your local BBBS agency, serve on their board, help with volunteer recruitment, or advocate with funders on their behalf.
- ✔ **Sharing mentoring stories:** Use your platform — speeches, social media, community events — to highlight local mentor-mentee relationships and celebrate impact.
- ✔ **Normalizing mentoring:** Frame mentoring as universal benefit, not deficit-based intervention. Emphasize that all young people deserve guides, not just those facing challenges.
- ✔ **Removing stigma:** Combat misconceptions that mentoring is only for "troubled youth" by showcasing diverse participants and emphasizing prevention over remediation.
- ✔ **Allocating public resources:** If you control budgets, direct funding to mentoring programs. If you don't, advocate with those who do.
- ✔ **Measuring and reporting progress:** Track mentoring capacity in your community, set goals for growth, and report publicly on progress toward ensuring every child who needs a mentor has one.



✔ LITTLE KEON & BIG MARSHALL

PHILANTHROPY

Mentorship represents infrastructure investment that pays dividends for generations. Unlike programmatic funding that requires constant renewal, investment in mentoring capacity creates lasting community assets. The evidence base is unequivocal, the return on investment proven, and the need urgent. This is the moment to drive systemic change by funding capacity building, supporting advocacy, and investing in the mentorship ecosystem.

Tangible actions you can take include:

- ✔ **Funding capacity building, not just programming:** Support investments in staff training, technology systems, volunteer recruitment infrastructure, and organizational development that enable agencies to serve more youth sustainably.
- ✔ **Making multi-year commitments:** Three-to-five-year grants allow organizations to plan strategically and build lasting capacity rather than chasing annual renewals.
- ✔ **Supporting advocacy efforts:** Fund policy work that elevates mentorship in state and federal conversations about education, workforce development, and youth services.
- ✔ **Investing in innovation:** Support pilot programs testing new mentoring models like virtual mentoring, culturally specific approaches, programs for emerging-adult populations.
- ✔ **Convening stakeholders:** Use your platform to bring together business leaders, policymakers, educators, and community organizations to build collaborative mentoring ecosystems.
- ✔ **Funding research and evaluation:** Support longitudinal studies that strengthen the evidence base and demonstrate long-term impact to policymakers and other funders.



POTENTIAL MENTORS

You don't need to be perfect to be a mentor. You don't need special skills or extensive time. You need to show up consistently for a young person, sharing ordinary activities and demonstrating care. If you've wondered how to make a difference in these challenging times, mentoring provides a concrete answer. Youth in your community are waiting for someone like you.

Tangible actions you can take include:

- ✔ **Connecting with a mentorship organization:** Contact your local agency to learn about opportunities. Organizations provide training, careful matching, and ongoing support — you don't do this alone.
- ✔ **Committing to consistency:** Research shows relationship duration matters more than time intensity. Plan to meet 2-4 times monthly for at least one year — consistency builds trust.
- ✔ **Being yourself:** You don't need to be an expert in anything except being authentically you. Share your experiences, interests, and even your struggles. Vulnerability builds connection.
- ✔ **Starting simple:** Mentoring happens through ordinary activities — playing sports, doing homework, cooking together, talking about life. You don't need elaborate plans or expensive outings.
- ✔ **Listening more than you fix:** Young people often need someone to listen and validate their experiences more than someone to solve their problems. Your presence matters more than your answers.
- ✔ **Considering workplace mentoring:** If time is limited, ask your employer about programs that allow mentoring during work hours, or explore virtual mentoring options.
- ✔ **Encouraging others:** Once you experience the reciprocal benefits of mentoring, invite colleagues, friends, and family members to consider becoming mentors too.

WHAT EACH ADDITIONAL \$1 MILLION INVESTED IN MENTORSHIP DELIVERS

Based on BBBSA program costs of \$2,500–3,500 per youth annually, each \$1 million investment enables:

300-400

young people served for one year



\$40-57.2 MILLION

in potential additional lifetime earnings for the cohort of mentored youth in the study, *The Long-Term Impacts of Mentors*

\$60,000-85,000

saved by employers in reduced turnover costs

\$3 MILLION

in total public benefit

THE BOTTOM LINE

We face challenges that can't be solved by programs alone: political polarization that fractures communities, economic segregation that limits opportunity, loneliness that undermines public health, and erosion of trust across differences.

Mentorship directly addresses these societal challenges by building the human connections that hold communities together. Every mentoring relationship creates a bridge. Every bridge strengthens our social fabric. Every stronger community becomes more resilient, more prosperous, and more hopeful. In a world of complex problems, mentorship offers something rare: a simple, proven, scalable solution that works.

The young people navigating today's challenges didn't create the conditions they face. They came of age during a pandemic that stole critical developmental experiences. They're growing up in a digital world that promises connection but often delivers isolation. We owe them more than sympathy — we owe them support. And that support requires recognition that human development happens through human relationships, and that mentorship must be fully integrated into the fabric of society if we are to navigate what lies ahead.

When we change the odds for millions of young people, we change society itself. We create communities with lower crime rates and stronger social cohesion. We build an economy strengthened by workers with higher earnings, better skills, and greater engagement. We foster civic engagement enriched by citizens who vote more frequently, volunteer at higher rates, and bridge divides across differences. The ripple effects of mentorship extend far beyond individual lives — they transform the communities where we live, work, and raise our families.

This vision is achievable. The evidence is overwhelming. The capacity can be built. What's needed is collective will and recognition that mentorship is essential social infrastructure that makes everything else work better.

A society where every young person has a mentor is a society invested in its own future.

Let's build it together.



BIG COREY & LITTLE DREZDEN



LITTLE BRIELLE & BIG MAURISHA



LITTLE ALEX & BIG DANIEL

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