

RESOURCE SEVEN

LEARNING MENTORS FOR STUDENTS IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

Mentoring has the potential to improve student connection, belonging and confidence at school, particularly for those disengaged from learning (Cruddas, 2005). The *Partnering Agreement*¹ requires that schools allocate school-based Learning Mentors for all students in care.

Frequently asked questions

1. Who should attend SSGs? When should we allocate a mentor and who should it be?

A mentor should be allocated in a timely manner. This may be when a student first starts school, following school transitions, or when the student first enters out-of-home care. The mentor should be identified by the leadership team and the process should involve the student to ensure a good fit. Consideration of a staff member's skills, experience, gender, workload and existing relationship with the student is critical.

2. Can the classroom teacher also be their mentor? Can the 'Designated Teacher' be the student mentor?

No, the mentor should not be directly involved in the teaching of the student. The mentor can be the out-of-home care 'Designated Teacher'. Ideally, however, the mentor should ideally be a trusted staff member who is willing to take on the role voluntarily, outside of regular classroom, who has a particular connection and fit with the student.

3. What does the mentor actually do?

The aim of the mentoring role is to help the student stay connected to their schooling and to address barriers that may impact their learning. This might include:

- Getting to know the student and taking an interest in his/her life and learning
- Identifying any challenges that they may be facing and developing strategies that could assist
- Advocating for the student (e.g. ensuring that other teaching staff are made aware of their learning needs, interests, passions, or particular fears or struggles)
- Meeting with the student at a regular time. This would ideally occur as regularly as required
- Participating in SSG meetings and providing advice about additional supports that the student may require

¹Out Of Home Care Education Commitment: A Partnering Agreement between the Department of Human Services, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Catholic Education Commission of Victorian and Independent Schools Victoria (2011).

- Facilitating the student's input into the Individual Learning Plan

It is not the responsibility of a mentor to provide counselling. Further, the mentor should not have responsibility for supervising the student if he/she has behaved inappropriately and been removed from the classroom, as this can undermine the mentor relationship.

4. How will I be supported in my role as a mentor?

It is important that mentors receive ongoing support from the school's leadership team. This should include:

- Ensuring that an appropriate time and space is made available for the student to meet with mentors
- Providing formal avenues for professional support to the mentor (e.g. access to the Wellbeing Coordinator, Student Support Services, EAP)
- Providing access to Professional Development. Training packages for mentors are available on the DET website

A teacher's experience of mentoring:

"In late 2014, staff were asked to volunteer to act as a Learning Mentor to the students residing in out-of-home care. The basis for this was to offer a point of contact that was not the classroom teacher. I had already had some contact with Coby through being in the same level as him. The school leadership provided considerable support in terms of the requirements for this role. In addition, they provided some training videos which greatly helped me to understand how to approach and interact with Coby.

My role was to provide Coby with a point of contact that was not related to discipline or judgment of his work or behaviour. Instead, I offered Coby an informal, periodic meeting to check in with how he was going and to talk about anything he was either worried or excited about, whether this was home or school related. I found that Coby was very reticent at first and felt that he was a bit distrustful of me. Over a period of time he relaxed more during our discussions and I was able to learn a lot more about both his school and home life.

From my perspective I found that being able to be a mentor was hugely satisfying for me and helped me with my professional development as a teacher. It was very gratifying to develop a closer relationship with Coby and to see him change the way he was able to relate to me.

At the end of the year, I was able to work with my leadership team to arrange for Coby to be in my Grade 4 class which has worked wonderfully, although I can no longer be his mentor this year. I will be discussing with my leadership team as to whether I can be Coby's mentor when he moves to Grade 5 as I would love to continue to be part of his life in this way.

In my opinion, our school has put a lot of effort into this program and it has worked extremely well for the students. I would recommend that other teachers take an opportunity like this to both help a student in need and to extend their own professional learning".

Primary Classroom Teacher

Reference

Cruddas, L. (2005), Learning Mentors in Schools: Policy and Practice, Trentham Books Ltd, England.