



NYC Opportunity Response to PSA Evaluations of Cornerstone Mentoring

March 2018

Cornerstone Mentoring is a group mentoring initiative that aims to improve youth perspectives on school and attitudes toward adults and peers during transitions into middle school and high school. Evaluation of the program has demonstrated promising success achieving these goals. Participants build strong relationships with their mentors, engage consistently in their communities, and report high levels of belief in the importance of school and confidence in their ability to succeed academically.

Cornerstone Mentoring was launched in 2012 as part of the NYC Young Men's Initiative (YMI), a public-private partnership to address disparities among young men of color. The program enhances the services of Cornerstone centers¹ in public housing communities by matching volunteer mentors to groups of 4 to 5 youth. Youth and mentors engage in structured group mentoring, complete service activities, and attend outings or take field trips. Cornerstone centers and the Cornerstone Mentoring program are managed by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). The Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) supports program implementation, performance management, and evaluation for Cornerstone Mentoring and other YMI initiatives.

NYC Opportunity partnered with DYCD and Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA), a social policy research firm, to complete a first evaluation of Cornerstone Mentoring in 2014. This evaluation compared self-reported outcomes for participants in the program to those of youth who participated in non-mentoring offerings at Cornerstone centers. PSA found statistically significant differences in attitudes between the two groups, including that 92 percent of mentoring participants reported it was "very true" it was important for them to do well in school compared to 77 percent of Cornerstone youth not participating in mentoring.

Seeking to build on these findings, NYC Opportunity again partnered with DYCD and PSA to further explore how the program influences students' school engagement. PSA completed a quantitative analysis to assess whether attitudinal differences might translate into improved educational outcomes for participants. The evaluation documents how a low-intensity group mentoring approach can change young people's attitudes about education and create a positive, supportive environment for students with poor academic performance and low engagement in school.

PSA finds that the program has been reaching a relatively high-need population of young people, with 86 percent of participants being eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch and 29 percent eligible for special education services in the 2014-15 school year. Nearly 90 percent of mentoring participants scored "below proficient" on New York State mathematics assessments, which compares to less than 70 percent of students citywide. The pattern also holds for English Language Arts.

PSA documents five key strategies the program uses to help youth reframe attitudes toward school and engagement with learning: building strong relationships and a sense of belonging, developing self-efficacy for

¹ Cornerstones are community centers located in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments. Through Cornerstones, participants of all ages can engage in programming funded by DYCD. Typical youth programming includes sports, arts, and educational after-school services like tutoring or homework help.

learning, communicating high expectations, navigating emotional and physical safety concerns, and sharing new experiences and opportunities. While PSA did not find a statistically significant difference in school attendance for participants compared to their peers, the evaluation identified a correlation between more hours of mentoring and lower rates of school absence. Specifically, each 37 hours of mentoring corresponded on average with an additional school day attended. Nearly half of participants received at least this level of mentoring in the final year covered by the evaluation.

Across both evaluations discussed above, PSA used qualitative methods including site visits, focus groups, and interviews to assess program implementation and document best practices. In order to help NYC Opportunity and DYCD better inform mentor recruitment and supports, PSA also completed a stand-alone report analyzing the results of a survey of mentors complemented with more detailed interviews in spring 2016. Key best practices include:

- Group mentoring is valued as a good strategy to support team-building and leadership skills, but also requires intentionally structuring large group activities, finding opportunities for one-on-one time, and matching mentors to individual mentees within the group.
- Locating services in community centers facilitates communication between youth and their mentors, as well as among the adults in participants' lives including their families, mentors, and teachers.
- Engaging mentors who value education and are “credible messengers” – sharing common backgrounds or experiences with youth – supports learning outcomes and mentoring relationships.

Based on some of the promising findings highlighted above, YMI expanded the program in 2016 to serve more high school youth. The expansion has introduced 31 new programs focused on serving this population, with a total of 49 centers currently offering the program for middle school or high school youth. The expansion supports YMI's goal to create 5,000 mentoring opportunities for high school youth as part of former President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative. Similar to the middle school program, the high school expansion focuses on supporting youth as they transition from high school by exploring college and career opportunities. NYC Opportunity is further evaluating this adaptation of the model with an implementation study anticipated for release in spring 2018 and will continue to use evaluation findings to inform next steps for the program.

Jean-Marie Callan

Deputy Director of Programs and Evaluation