

Garden Mentorship Program

Many high schools recommend (or require) that students participate in a service-learning project — something that benefits both the students and their community. The ideal service-learning project reinforces what students have learned in the classroom and gives them an opportunity to transfer those lessons to real-world situations. Mentoring can be a wonderful and very educational service learning experience.



KidsGardening editors interviewed educators from a successful service-learning project in Downsville, Louisiana, that enlisted tenth-graders to serve as mentors to third-graders at a nearby school. Part of the tenth-graders' curriculum involved developing skills around setting goals, conflict resolution, and developing empathy. The third-graders, in turn, were honing their literacy skills with garden-themed books that reinforced what they were learning in their own school garden.

Following are some of the details of the project and the benefits to both groups. Hopefully, their success will inspire you to consider your own version of a mentoring service project!

Mentoring: Steps to Success

Here's a step by step look at the logistics behind this innovative mentorship program:

Preparation. The teacher of the high-school group discussed the logistics of the program, encouraging student-mentors to ask questions, anticipate challenges, and imagine what questions or concerns the younger kids might have and how they might address them. The mentors reflected on how they felt in elementary school.

Next, the teacher reviewed teaching strategies and discussed different learning styles. They brainstormed ways to check in with mentees regarding reading skills and comprehension. What concerns did they have as they imagine themselves in the role of mentor?

Journals and reflection. Each student mentor had a notebook where they recorded their thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns. Throughout the course of the mentoring project, the teacher prompted the group with thought-provoking questions. Requiring mentors to record their reflections each week (or more often) helped tie their mentoring back to the classroom objectives around setting goals, conflict resolution, and developing empathy. This is a critical difference between simply volunteering (also valuable!), and service learning, which is structured to reinforce elements of the curriculum.

Mentors, meet your mentees. Once the logistics were ironed out, the older and younger students were randomly paired, and a weekly

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45-minute meeting was scheduled. The first few meetings involved all the students, using a variety of games and activities to help the groups get to know each other.

Then the individual mentor-mentee pairs settled into their work. Each mentor-mentee pair chose a book from a collection of garden-related fiction and nonfiction books. During their sessions together, they took turns reading aloud to each other, and then discussed the subject and their reactions to it. If time allowed, a trip to the school garden, games, or an art session followed.

Reflection. After each session, mentors reflected on what worked well, what they learned, and what surprises they encountered. As a group, they shared their experiences and discussed what they might do differently in the next session.

Ultimately, each mentor-mentee pair wrote and illustrated a homemade book, drawing upon what they learned from the book they read together, as well as their time in the school garden.

What They Gained

The tenth grade mentors grew academically, personally, and socially. Many came to value the relationship and relished the role of being a “big buddy” to a younger student. The mentors found themselves researching answers to questions posed by the younger kids, piquing their own curiosity about the subjects. They also realized the importance of being a role model, and gained a degree of confidence and maturity.

The mentees, in turn, loved having the attention of and one-on-one time with an older student. They were thrilled to see their words and drawings compiled into their very own book. Best of all, their reading and comprehension skills really did improve!

Meeting Standards

A mentoring program provides context for helping kids develop their social and emotional skills, *and* you can tie it to standards. As the Louisiana mentors prepared to teach younger kids, they became more engaged in the topic. Learning became fun again! This, in turn, resulted in better outcomes regarding state curriculum requirements.

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