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Resources & ideas for parents & educators of gifted children

Talent

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Center for
Talent
DEVELOPMENT®

Why Mentoring Works

You know Jack Palmer is the right person for a discussion on mentoring when, in response to the question "What exactly is mentoring?," he sends you the definition for mentorship that he recently submitted to Merriam Webster's Open Dictionary. Quite simply, Palmer is invested in mentoring and its success. As *Talented & Gifted Specialist, Mentorship Coordinator, Academic Teams Coach and Science Chair for the Stoughton High School, Stoughton Area School District, Wisconsin*, he's been operating the school's mentoring program for 15 years. And it's been very successful. Palmer estimates more than 700 students have participated. But let's get back to the basics.

Center for Talent Development (CTD): What exactly is mentoring?

Jack Palmer: A mentor is a "wise and trusted teacher or counselor." A student is one who "makes a study of something...an attentive observer". These definitions are from *Merriam Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary, 1995*. Don't you think it's time for dictionaries to include the term "mentorship"? This is what I recently submitted to *Merriam Webster's Open Dictionary*: "Mentorship — a relationship between two or more individuals in which expertise and knowledge are exchanged. The relationship includes one or more wise and trusted counselors and attentive observers or protégés."

CTD: Why is mentoring important, particularly for gifted high school students?

Palmer: Today's high school students are highly mobile, technologically savvy and beginning to make their own life choices. Typically, students, not their parents or teachers, select their personal activities from the multitude of academic, athletic and social possibilities. In other words, students participate in activities that interest them. Experience dictates that students don't just want to take another test and have another adult tell them how smart they are. They want to *do something!*

Also, secondary school students have few opportunities to experience the relationships between high school courses and their academic and career futures. Mentorships provide opportunities for students to view their perceived passion first-hand and see if it is a "good fit" which can save time, money and frustration as they pursue their future lives.

CTD: When should a student begin looking for a mentor?

Palmer: Typically, during the student's sophomore, junior and/or senior year of high school. The timing really depends on three factors: the maturity of the student, his or her paradigms of interest and the student's dedication to the time and commitment required in a mentorship.

CTD: Where should a student look for a mentor?

Palmer: Mentorship sources are everywhere but here's a partial list, beginning with the easy ones:

- Parents/guardians/family
- Family friends
- Teachers

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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE MENTORING – YES YOU SHOULD!

Jack Palmer spoke at our Summer 2008 "Opportunities for the Future" conference

about a subject that's increasingly important to gifted students – mentoring. Students get ideas as to what they'd like to do for a living from every place imaginable. But oftentimes, they don't know exactly what choosing a particular profession means in terms of a "typical" day. For example, a student who attended the medical career session at that same conference said the presenter's descriptions of opportunities in the medical field were so compelling that she wanted to "work in the ER and save lives". But what's it really like to work in an emergency room?

Now, admittedly, getting a student into an emergency room wouldn't be easy, but if there were a way to do it, Jack Palmer would figure it out. That's because he thinks mentoring is a key component of a student's success. (See "Why Mentoring Works," left.)

The other article in this issue of *Talent*, "Mentoring Families," describes a different kind of mentoring. A school district in Illinois is deliberate in its efforts not just to make all of its families aware of opportunities for gifted students, but also to do a little "hand holding," if you will, of the parents who are unfamiliar with these kinds of programs.

Two very different ways of mentoring. Both are very important.

What does this have to do with you? With just a little bit of extra effort you, too, can be a mentor. Start by offering your services to the schools in your neighborhood. Branch out from there.

Work in a school system? Set up a process similar to the one at Oak Terrace. (See "Mentoring Families," page 2)

The return on your investment in both cases will be well worth your time and effort.

Paula Abezushi-Kubilus

WHO SAID THIS ?

“ We learn more by looking for the answer to a question and not finding it than we do from learning the answer itself. ”

Answer at <http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/resources/newslettersolutions>

Mentoring Families

The administration and teachers at Oak Terrace, an elementary school in Highland, Illinois, with 550 students in Kindergarten through grade 5, have taken a special interest in helping – mentoring, if you will – the school’s gifted students,

When it comes to additional opportunities for gifted students, Oak Terrace school personnel go the extra mile by providing assistance to the families of gifted children in three basic ways:

- Making personal contact and telling them about the opportunities.
- Helping parents fill out the forms required for gifted programs.
- Setting up parent meetings to explain fully the opportunities and to have parents meet each other and create their own support system.

particularly students with financial need, gain access to various academic programs. This past summer, four Oak Terrace students attended Center for Talent Development (CTD) Summer Program.

But Oak Terrace students don’t just come to the Northwestern campus for CTD’s Summer Program. They participate in the Saturday Enrichment Program and they sign up for Northwestern University’s Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS), CTD’s above grade-level testing program, which provides students, parents and educators with information about a student’s academic potential. Since 2005, approximately 30 Oak Terrace students have participated in Summer or Saturday programs with many of these students signing up for multiple sessions. When you add in the students who test, the Oak Terrace principal says the number of students who participate in CTD programs is about 20 annually.

Where does the impetus for this extra effort originate? How is it nurtured? Who nurtures it? To find out what exactly Oak Terrace does right – and to show other districts steps the staff might take to model Oak Terrace’s commitment to gifted students and their families – CTD asked Sandy Anderson, Oak Terrace’s principal, and Jamie DiCarlo, the gifted and talented coordinator, to answer these questions (and others).

“The impetus comes from the teachers and from me, the principal,” says Anderson, who oversees a school that is more than half low-income and more than half Hispanic with a not inconsequential number of military dependents. “We do whatever it takes to make a difference in the lives of our students.

Jamie DiCarlo



“We believe that low-income children are under identified for gifted opportunities and that it is crucial that they be able to take advantage of programs like those offered at Center for Talent Development in order to maximize their strengths and their contributions to society,” she continues.

One Oak Terrace teacher who is definitely filled with “impetus” is Jamie DiCarlo. “Something that really drew me to the school was the level of commitment to the community held by the faculty and staff,” says this seven-year Oak Terrace veteran. “This commitment and support are reciprocated. In recent years our PTA started a Family Network to assist families with varying needs. Prior to this, Oak Terrace had a Student Assistance Team. Historically, there is a legacy of commitment to this school.

How to Identify Gifted Students

“The effort to identify gifted students and facilitate life-changing opportunities really originated from a desire by our past and present gifted and talented staff and the Oak Terrace administration,” continues DiCarlo. “Wendy Larsen and principals Anderson and Art Abrego sought ways to educate all of our population on characteristics of the gifted, enabling us to identify students with gifted characteristics. The referral and identification process, in conjunction with some of Ruby Payne’s work (editor’s note: Payne, who received her PhD from Loyola University, is a co-author of *Hidden Rules of Class at Work, a Framework for Understanding Poverty* and a well-known speaker on poverty and the “mindsets of economic classes”), helped us identify students who might be in the early phases of learning a second language but show signs of academic giftedness.”

“Every parent wants to advocate for his/her child,” continues DiCarlo. “Some parents have immediate access to the tools they need; other parents look to the school for support in providing these opportunities.”

Hence the need for partnerships – mentoring relationships that Anderson believes provide children with opportunities that will have a positive impact on their lives.

Sandy Anderson



To help position the students for success, Oak Terrace provided parents with their own mini orientation before the CTD three-week Summer Program in 2008. Then DiCarlo helped parents complete the application forms. When the students were accepted, she met with each parent to go over the summer packet sent by Center for Talent Development. “We made sure all the questions that every family had were answered before the children left for Evanston,” she says.

The idea of sending children to any kind of a summer camp – much less an academic camp – was foreign to a number of the families. “For some of the parents who had received their education in other countries, this away-from-home approach to summer learning is different and new,” says DiCarlo. But DiCarlo had a sure-fire way of bridging the cultural gap. “For the families who hesitated a little bit, I simply referred them to the parents of students from previous years.” They were almost more effective at “selling” the Summer Program than the Oak Terrace staff. Another benefit: The former parents created a positive and informational support system for parents new to the program.

A Field Trip to NU

DiCarlo used the same tactic on the students. She had a previous participant explain to the one slightly reluctant student that he wouldn’t have to study all the time, that in fact he’d be able to play soccer during the afternoon activities. “Meeting with parents and kids to go over any concerns and to reassure them is critical,” says Anderson.

Oak Terrace students in grade 5 also take a field trip to Northwestern University to understand how prestigious it is to be able to attend classes at Center for Talent Development, explains Anderson. “It also decreases whatever anxiety the students have.”

Is the extra effort worth it? There’s a resounding “Yes!” when DiCarlo and Anderson are asked this question. “The students gained so much,” says Anderson. “They have much more confidence. They feel empowered, they just know more. They developed their analytical skills a great deal and they learned how to –socialize even more. We couldn’t have asked for anything else to happen.” ●

Why Mentoring Works

continued from page 1

- Colleges and universities
- Business and industry
- The Internet
- The telephone book

Here in Stoughton, we find mentors in every way you can imagine. I've even had potential adult mentors standing or sitting at my office door during lunch with visitor's pass in hand.

"Are you Jack Palmer?"

"You bet ya'!"

"I'd like to be a mentor in your TAG (Talented and Gifted) program."

"What's your area of expertise?"

"Theater acting and production."

"Then you've come to the right place.

We have numerous fine arts mentorships and are always looking for more student opportunities."

And so it goes to the tune of over 125 current or potential mentors.

As you might expect, there are some questions that should come into play. With whom is the student comfortable? Why does s/he want to pursue this particular person? As we have created numerous

opportunities for our students to exchange academic information, they often hear about existing mentorship programs from another student.

Sometimes the parents, guardians, family friends or school staff know of potential mentors. I even know some people! If we don't have anyone in mind, we've found that the best way to develop initial contacts is through the Yellow Pages. You "let your fingers do the walking," thus creating an initial *personal* connection. We set up a phone interview to see if the person is interested. Generally, the student makes the call, but I'm typically sitting right there with the student.

CTD: The list of mentorships you have created is impressive both in number and breadth of subject matter (see list on CTD website <http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/resources/planningahead/index.html#mentoring>). Why do you think your program has been so successful?

Palmer: Several factors come into play. One factor is the need to have a written mentorship proposal. We have a template to follow so the students can pre-address a host of issues regarding their plan.

For example, it is essential to develop a curriculum design.

Here, the student needs to set goals and objectives. We also have a methodology section where the student and mentor answer the question, "How can our goals be reached?" All of our courses are designed for a minimum of one-half of a high school credit. Other factors include: "Where is the mentorship located?" and "How is the student going to get there safely?"

Parental buy-in and student safety are critical, as well. There can be no surprises. When appropriate, safety agreements (often including background checks) are required. So timely communication among all the parties is important. You need to have everyone participate and sign off on every step including the students, the mentor, the parent or guardian, the gifted specialist and sometimes even the principal.

CTD: How should a student initially approach a mentor? What should s/he expect? Ask for?

Palmer: As a student contacts potential mentors s/he should remember, first

impressions are important! Students should:

- Have a brief *written* mentorship proposal
- Know what they are going to say ahead of time
- Practice the introduction
- Dress "appropriately" and speak "clearly" during the first face-to-face meeting
- *Listen* to their potential mentor's thoughts
- Give them some time to consider the proposal
- Contact potential mentors one at a time. (Unless this is part of the initial plan, you don't want two or more mentors to say "Yes!" to a proposal simultaneously.)

CTD: What do ideal mentoring experiences provide to students?

Palmer: Real-world experiences related to their perceived academic and career interests, and personal connections with experienced field professionals that often last well beyond the actual mentorship. Also, an improved focus on college and career goals with a resultant potential time and dollar savings as the student will develop a clearer academic vision.

CTD: Why would anyone want to mentor a student? Isn't it time consuming with a minimal return on investment?

Palmer: I love answering this question! I think the return on the investment is huge. Adults who become mentors are astounded when they find out what gifted students can teach them! The relationship typically becomes very mutual. The mentors frequently discuss their positive experiences with other adults, thus creating new mentorship connections. Who knows where the next great scientist, musician or animator will come from? I also think our "return-on-investment" is increasing because, as word of the program spreads, people from outside our immediate community and school are volunteering to become mentors.

Remember that nobody is getting paid to be a mentor; everyone is a volunteer. Not only are our numbers high – so far this year we have about 40 students in a mentorship program – but I've noticed more of the school staff is signing up to mentor our students. So the return is obviously there. ●

Mentoring at Wisconsin Public Radio

One of our early mentoring programs developed when a student came to me and said he wanted to learn about radio engineering. He didn't know anybody in this paradigm and neither did I, but a colleague had a contact with Wisconsin Public Radio in Madison. One of the engineers thought it was a great idea. In fact he got together with other engineers on staff and figured out a comprehensive program that involved each of them – I think there were six – teaching a different radio engineering module. The program was so awesome that when the original student told his friends about it, two more students asked to join. Three afternoons each week after school classes were completed, the three students would travel to Madison. So they ended up working with and being mentored by every single engineer in the home office of Wisconsin Public Radio. I mean, how cool is that.





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NEWS, DATES & OTHER IMPORTANT CTD INFORMATION

NUMATS DVD Available!

Need a visual aid for a parent meeting? Just want to know more about Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS)? CTD has a DVD that explains the entire NUMATS process and its benefits. All your questions will be answered in 15 minutes via interviews with parents, students, gifted coordinators and program administrators. Want a copy? Send your contact information to ctd@northwestern.edu, write NUMATS DVD in the subject line and we'll put one in the mail to you – free of charge.

Great Programs at CTD

Sign up for Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS), a program that offers above-level tests, EXPLORE, ACT or SAT, to students in grades 3 to 9 several years ahead of schedule. Online registration available now!

Gifted LearningLinks three-month Enrichment classes for students in grades 3-8 start again on January 15, 2009. AP® and honors classes start on the 15th of every month. New format fosters even more interaction among participants in each class.

Saturday Enrichment Program Winter session starts on January 10, 2009.

Have fun next summer! And learn a lot too!

Three-week Summer Program Session 1 starts on June 28, 2009. Session 2 begins on July 19, 2009. Specifics including course descriptions, dates for all Summer Programs, and online registration will be available in January.

CivicWeek, service-learning field studies for outstanding high school students offered in spring 2009. Check the web site for specific dates and locations.

Check out CTD's new web site!

We've updated it, spiffed it up, made it more user friendly and added great new photos. But we created it for you. Suggestions? Send them along to the CTD e-mail and put "Web Site Suggestions" in the subject line.

For more information on any of these programs or offerings, go to the CTD web site, www.ctd.northwestern.edu, write us an e-mail at ctd@northwestern.edu or call us at 847/491-3782. ●



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Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University is an accredited learning center and research facility serving the gifted community. Through Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search and other programs, CTD has assisted more than 500,000 families. Offering a variety of learning alternatives for the gifted student, CTD provides school-year programs such as Saturday Enrichment Program, Gifted LearningLinks distance learning, Civic Education Project, and Project EXCITE, as well as summer academic programs (Leapfrog, Apogee, Spectrum, and Equinox), informational conferences for families and educators, scholarships, and graduate courses on gifted education. Led by nationally recognized scholar Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Ph.D., the Center also conducts and publishes academic research on gifted students, particularly in the areas of accelerated learning and special populations of gifted learners. CTD is accredited as a supplemental school for the gifted by North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.



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