Gifted and Talented Education

Mentoring

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SETTING UP A MENTOR PROGRAM

Mentors act as advisers, consultants, specialists, models and sometimes critics so that they can bring about fulfilment of the student’s goals and objectives. This is based on the principle of giving each student a differentiated curriculum to meet individual needs. It provides a unique opportunity for gifted and talented students, helping to satisfy their specific learning needs which may not be easily met in the regular classroom.

The aspects most frequently cited as benefits of a mentor program are encouragement, role modelling and emotional or academic support in a challenging environment.

Mentor programs can operate out of school grounds and outside school hours - after school, during the school holidays, in the evenings or at weekends - and can be managed either directly face-to-face, online or through correspondence.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD MENTOR PROGRAM

The mentor program taps the ability of people to help others. The relationship becomes a contract, with individuals and the community sharing resources, responsibilities and benefits.

The mentor program provides:

- opportunities for formal learning to occur alongside the development of social and interpersonal skills
- a mutual sharing exchange between two people with interest and ability in a specific field
- a competency-based model of learning at a high level of achievement.
Mentors are not substitute teachers. The relationship should be a “meeting of minds”, a learning situation where there is two-way communication, two-way input and a productive output.

The meeting between a student and a mentor should:

• be based on mutual respect
• focus on the search for answers and the process should be valued and rewarded
• help students dare, take risks and be challenged in their learning
• recognise the need for creative thought
• encourage students to talk about, think about and reflect upon the things that are most important to them
• through careful observation, discussion and challenge provide a balance between personal involvement, information, imagination, logic and practice.

These are the key elements in any type of productive, self-generating learning.

Identification
The Student

Students who are identified as possible candidates for the program should be able to provide evidence of work undertaken in their own time in a field or to a depth not usually offered in the regular school program. The student should:

• possess a high level of ability
• possess self-motivation, an established sense of direction and a more mature approach to learning
• demonstrate commitment to the particular field.

Parents/caregivers are encouraged to nominate their children for participation in the program. They should contact their child’s school and make the necessary application.
The Mentor

A mentor can be a parent/caregiver, student, teacher or other professional - in fact anyone who has a similar interest to the student and who has reached a high level of expertise in that particular field.

Mentors work with students individually or in a small group to encourage and develop each student's potential. The mentor guides the student through an exchange of ideas that builds on strengths and interests and benefits both the student and the mentor.

The relationship between student and mentor is NOT that of teacher and pupil. The mentor is there to inspire, guide, enhance and intensify the student’s current expertise. The mentor can encourage the student’s involvement with others in the same field and with the wider school and community. This may improve the student’s career opportunities. Mentors give their time and expertise voluntarily.

Businesses, clubs, community groups and tertiary institutions can also assist schools in the process of identifying mentors. As mentors become more familiar with the scheme, they may be able to extend the program by encouraging colleagues to become involved as mentors.

Planning and Organisation

Schools may also seek to work with the region’s coordinator for gifted and talented students to facilitate the process of planning and implementing the program.

The process has several phases.
• Application forms are made available. Students and parents/caregivers indicate in the application forms how they believe the student may benefit from a mentor.

• A register of student nominations is established, following consultation with parents/caregivers.

• A register of possible mentors is developed, often by a letter requesting the names of people who may be interested in becoming a mentor. This letter can be sent to schools, businesses, clubs, community groups and tertiary institutions.

• Interviews are held to establish the corresponding list of students who will be matched with mentors.

• Security checks are processed for potential mentors.

• Mentors and students are matched and the first meeting, or link, is set up for attendance by the student, parents/caregivers, the mentor and the coordinating teacher.

• The link is evaluated during and at its conclusion, by the student, parents/caregivers and the mentor.

Once an application form has been received, an interview is held to determine:

• evidence of the student’s work in the area of interest

• the student’s and parents’/caregivers’ understanding of the program and their commitment to it

• the student’s responsibilities to both the regular school program and the mentor program.

Identified students have access to the mentor program, provided that an appropriate mentor can be found to assist them. Attempts to find a suitable mentor may be based on geographic location and expertise in the student's chosen area.