

## ***BBBSMD Education Investment Op-Ed***

January is national Mentoring month. While programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters engage youth in positive and fun activities, in urban centers all over the country, mentoring also has a tremendous impact on education and graduation rates. The evidence shows that students who participate in such programs experience improved grades, higher attendance, and a more positive attitude toward their studies. Further, they experience measurable decreases in alcohol and drug use, violence, skipping school, and dropping out of school.

The D.C.-based America's Promise Alliance found that Detroit has a deplorable 24.9% graduation rate. This was the lowest graduation rate in the entire nation. Factors such as the rise in drugs, violence, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration drive the graduation rate lower every year. If at-risk youth have a friend and mentor – someone to help them through difficult times, and especially in their formative younger years, then finishing high school becomes a possibility they believe they can achieve.

A poor graduation rate isn't just a negative outcome for young adults. It's bad for the community as well – not just for the well-known social ills, but very detrimental to society's pocketbook. A 2005 Princeton University study found that the average high school dropout costs \$260,000. One of the reasons is because dropouts face increased incarceration rates, and every inmate costs the State of Michigan \$29,000 per year. Further, dropouts pay significantly less taxes than graduates, less than 50% of what those with some college contribute, and about 25% of what a taxpayer with a college degree contributes. This is due to weakened earning capacity and, consequently, low average incomes.

A low graduation rate costs society more than money. Dropouts are statistically more likely to become teen parents and single parents, commit crimes, have physical and emotional health problems, become disabled, be unmarried, and rely on government social services such as food stamps, Medicaid, and unemployment. They are also more likely to have chronic employment issues for their entire lives. This means that not only are dropouts twice as likely to experience poverty, but they reduce the economic growth capacity of the community.

Beyond the tangible burdens on the community, each individual dropout goes through their own myriad of emotional consequences as a result of failing to graduate. They may feel shame and guilt for being unable to secure employment, sometimes for extended periods of time. They may feel like they want to go back and finish, perhaps get their G.E.D, but living in a culture where dropping out of school is so pervasive is not particularly encouraging. Finally, dropouts often experience feelings of depression and helplessness that are less common among those who do earn a high school diploma. The high dropout rate is causing unhappiness and suffering for both dropouts and their fellow community members, in both measurable and immeasurable ways.

Nationally, at 100 years old, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is the oldest of such mentoring programs, and sets the standard in youth mentoring. The Big Brothers Big Sisters model is effective because we have developed our programs using evidence-based

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prevention strategies, and are continually monitoring social trends and statistics to update these as necessary.

Mentoring is not a cure-all for society's challenges, but it is an absolutely essential component of a comprehensive effort to improve the educational success rates of local youth. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Detroit, the local affiliate serving southeastern Michigan, has already started to directly confront the social problems that are borne of the educational maelstrom in Detroit and Southeast Michigan. Mentoring can help create a stronger, healthier and more economically viable community.

Many people believe that Big Brothers Big Sisters is purely a provider of mentoring services that does a great job with kids. But we are much more than that. Any investments in our schools and in improving the safety of our neighborhoods that don't also include evidenced-based prevention strategies focused on our children miss a tremendous opportunity to effect real long-term transformation in our communities. The profit or return on investment in a mentoring program such as Big Brothers Big Sisters garners better schools, safer streets, and healthier productive young people ready to be contributors to society.

*Dara T. Munson, MPA is President & CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Detroit. Please call 313.309.0500 if you would like to volunteer or donate in support of National Mentoring month.*