

Focus on Mentee-Mentor Relationships

The 10th Grade Implementation of iMentor's College Ready Program



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The **Research Alliance** for
New York City Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing body of research has shown that supportive relationships between adults and young people, including those created by mentoring programs, can improve youth's odds of success.¹

The iMentor College Ready Program is an unusual model that combines school-based mentoring with technology and aspects of whole school reform. The program aims to create strong relationships between low-income youth and college-educated mentors—and to leverage these relationships to help students develop the mindsets, skills, and knowledge necessary to enroll and succeed in college.

To learn more about the process and efficacy of iMentor's approach, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools is conducting a mixed-methods evaluation of the College Ready Program in eight New York City high schools. The evaluation is examining iMentor's roll-out and implementation in these schools, as well as its impact on a range of outcomes related to students' preparation for college. This summary highlights findings from *Focus on Mentee-Mentor Relationships: The 10th Grade Implementation of iMentor's College Ready Program*, the second report in a series from our evaluation. The first, *Bringing Together Mentoring, Technology, and Whole School Reform: A First Look at the iMentor College Ready Program* (2015), examined the College Ready program's early implementation and presented preliminary program impacts for 9th grade students.

The current report focuses on iMentor's implementation in the 10th grade and explores the connection between various program activities and the development of close mentee-mentor relationships. Indeed, iMentor's leaders theorize that these relationships are the primary outcome of interest for 9th and 10th grade students, providing the foundation for college readiness, application, and enrollment work to take place in 11th and 12th grade. Please see the full report for more details about our methods and findings.

The iMentor College Ready Program

iMentor recruits partner schools that serve low-income students, looking particularly for principals who are committed to including iMentor in the school's culture.

Together, these activities are designed to build strong relationships between mentees and mentors. iMentor believes that students with close relationships with mentors

will be better able to learn the iMentor curriculum, and in turn, improve their non-cognitive skills, increase their college knowledge, succeed in the college application process, and ultimately graduate from college.

Across Schools, How Was iMentor Implemented for 10th Graders During the 2014-2015 School Year?

iMentor assigns a staff member, called a Program Coordinator (PC), to lead the implementation efforts in each iMentor partner school. PCs are responsible for managing iMentor's four key activities (described below). Large schools might have multiple PCs, as many as one for each grade. Every PC is supported by an iMentor Program Assistant (PA), who is responsible for a number of administrative duties (e.g., tracking student and mentor event attendance). Program Directors supervise and support multiple PCs and manage relationships between iMentor's central office and school leaders.

We examined iMentor's four key activities (as described below) using a variety of data sources, including interviews with iMentor and school staff and data from iMentor's proprietary data platform (e.g., information about student/mentor matches, iMentor classes and events, and logs of student and mentor emails). We used these data to assess how intensively students may have experienced the iMentor program. iMentor has established participation benchmarks for students and schools, codified in their "Core Metrics," which we use (when available) to assess if the program was implemented according to the program model.

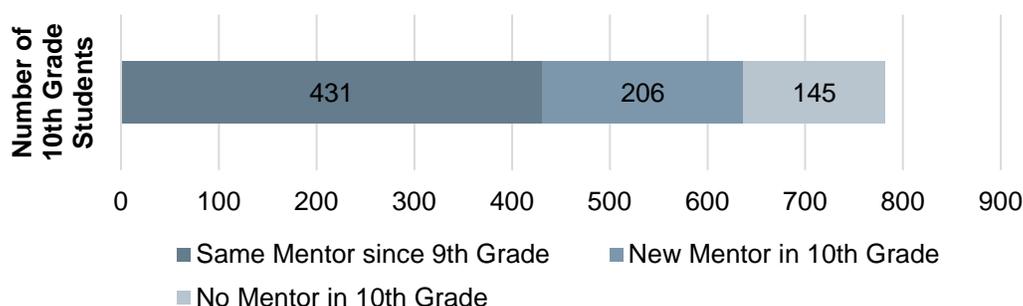
Key Activity 1: Matching students and mentors

At its core, iMentor is a program that brings together students and college-educated adults in a mentoring relationship. In its partner schools, iMentor aims to match as many students as possible with a mentor, beginning in their 9th grade year. The goal is to foster a strong mentoring relationship that will last throughout the students' high school career. iMentor makes matches based on gender and shared interests using an algorithm run through iMentor's proprietary data system as well as PCs' judgement. The algorithm suggests multiple potential mentors for each mentee; that school's PC then uses their discretion to determine the best match. In order for students to meaningfully participate in other key activities, students need to be matched with a mentor; iMentor faces a considerable challenge in trying to recruit and train

thousands of volunteer mentors who can commit to a four-year long mentoring relationship.

Figure ES-1 shows that of the 782 10th graders in the eight evaluation schools in the 2014-2015 school year, 637 students (81 percent) had a mentor in the fall of their 10th grade year; 431 students (55 percent) had the same mentor for their 9th and 10th grade years. Of the students who had a mentor in the fall of 2014, 90 percent remained matched for the entire school year.

Figure ES-1: Number of Matched Students in Fall of 10th Grade, 2014-2015



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on iMentor programmatic data.

Key Activity 2: Supporting mentee-mentor pairs

PCs support mentees and mentor pairs using a case management model, which is a process often used in social work and health care to track client needs and supports. Its usual steps include conducting a needs assessment, monitoring, service planning, case conferencing, and reassessment (HRSA, 2001). On a survey taken by mentors in Spring 2015,² mentors reported a high level of satisfaction with the support they receive from their PC. On a scale from 1 (“very unsatisfied”) to 4 (“very satisfied”), on average, 10th graders’ mentors ranked their satisfaction with support from their PC at 3.25.

Key Activity 3: Teaching non-cognitive skills and college knowledge

iMentor has developed a college readiness curriculum for 9th through 12th graders focused on helping students develop a specific set of non-cognitive skills (e.g., growth mindset, critical thinking, task persistence) and knowledge that program designers have identified as important for college enrollment and success.

PCs teach the iMentor curriculum during a weekly class that is programmed into students’ school schedule. The 10th grade iMentor class focuses on topics designed to

help students (1) build interest in and excitement about college and potential careers and (2) develop iMentor's target non-cognitive skills.

While we do not have data about the quality of instruction in the iMentor classes or the attendance of individual students, we are able to track the number of iMentor classes that students had the opportunity to attend (i.e., the number of times a given section met). We found that 99 percent of 10th grade students had the opportunity to attend at least 15 classes, and over 90 percent were offered at least 20 classes during the 2014-2015 school year.

PCs described some challenges related to teaching the iMentor curriculum—specifically, a mismatch between the amount of time they have to cover the day's theme and the breadth of the topics themselves. One PC described the problem:

I basically have 10 to 15 minutes to give a lesson in order to give each kid enough time to write an email...how much can we really build critical thinking³ in that time frame?

Some topics may be better suited for that structure than others. For example, it might indeed be possible to generate excitement about college through a short introduction, which can be built upon through work with a mentor.

Key Activity 4: Providing pairs with opportunities to interact

iMentor provides mentees and mentors with opportunities to build their relationship by exchanging weekly emails and meeting in-person at monthly iMentor events. Some pairs also choose to stay in touch in other, less formal ways (e.g., texting).

Emails

During the iMentor class, students receive a prompt related to the day's lesson and are asked to send an email to their mentor replying to that prompt. In turn, iMentor expects mentors to respond to their student's email, and include their own thoughts on a separate prompt.

iMentor's benchmark is for pairs to exchange emails in the time between two iMentor classes 65 percent of the time. We found that just 38 percent of 10th graders with mentors met this standard. Pairs who exchanged emails at least 55 percent of the time were considered to be approaching iMentor's benchmark; 11 percent of pairs fell into this category.

In recognition of the challenges in meeting email goals, iMentor has developed and started using a new cloud-based interface called Canvas. On Canvas, instead of

sending emails to mentors, students work on projects online, and mentors respond to students' work. As our evaluation continues, we will track students' activities on Canvas and compare their engagement with this project-based learning to their engagement with emails.

Events

Once a month, each iMentor school holds a two-hour event for mentees and mentors, focusing on a current topic in the iMentor curriculum. Events start around 6:00 p.m. to accommodate mentors' work schedules. At events, pairs participate in activities planned by the PC, and are given time to complete worksheets and talk through a set of discussion prompts.

All of the PCs and school employees we interviewed described events as the most important place where mentees and mentors develop relationships. One school staff member explained:

It's very refreshing to see the adults interacting with the students and the students get[ting] excited about seeing this person. It's sort of like it's an uncle or an aunt. It's really good. Also [iMentor] make[s] it very attractive. It's not like we're just sitting there and talking. There are exercises. They get to do scavenger hunts. They have to fill out a document and create something together, and there's stuff that's related to their—the curriculum and to the classes and the emails that they have sent.

iMentor expects each student matched with a mentor to attend at least six events a year. We found that 37 percent of students with mentors met this benchmark. An additional 24 percent of students with mentors attended four or five events, which is considered approaching iMentor's benchmark. The remaining students—almost 40 percent—attended fewer than four events.

Informal interactions

With parental consent, students and mentors can communicate by phone or text outside of formal iMentor interactions. On a survey students took in the spring of their 10th grade year as part of our evaluation,⁴ 16 percent of respondents said they talk to their mentor on the phone, and 50 percent reported texting with their mentor. Thirteen percent reported both talking on the phone and texting their mentor. It is important to note that we do not know how often students and mentors communicate by phone or text, or the content of these communications.

How Did Program Implementation Vary Between Schools?

The implementation of iMentor varied substantially across the eight schools participating in our evaluation. Table ES-1 below summarizes the extent to which each school met iMentor’s benchmarks for key activities. A ✓+ signifies that iMentor achieved “high fidelity to the model” at that partner school on a given activity. A ✓ signifies that iMentor achieved “moderate fidelity” to the model in that school (i.e., did not meet the benchmark for a given activity, but approached it). An ✗ signifies that iMentor did not meet the benchmark for how a particular activity should be implemented in that school. (For details about the benchmarks, please see page 24 in the full report.)

Please note that iMentor does not have a benchmark for one of the four key activities—supporting pairs—so it is not included in this section.

Table ES-1 shows that, in some schools, iMentor implemented the College Ready program with relatively high fidelity to the model, while in others, it did not. For example, at Sequoia and Palm, iMentor met expectations for matching students with

Table ES-1: Fidelity to School Implementation Benchmarks, by School

| | Matching Students with Mentors | Teaching College Knowledge and Non-Cognitive Skills | Providing Opportunities to Interact | |
|----------------|--------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Matches Made (%) | Classes Held (#) | Email Frequently (%) ¹ | Attend At Least Six Events (%) |
| Ginkgo | ✓ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Fig | ✓ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Redwood | ✗ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Maple | ✓ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Cherry Blossom | ✓ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Oak | ✗ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Sequoia | ✓+ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✓ |
| Palm | ✓+ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |
| All Schools | ✓ | ✓+ | ✗ | ✗ |

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on iMentor programmatic data.

Notes: Schools are represented with pseudonyms to keep their identities confidential. We plan to incorporate a benchmark for pair support in future reports. Table includes first-time 10th graders enrolled in the school as of October 20th. ¹ A frequently emailing pair is one where mentees and mentors email each another following 65 percent of the classes. For example, if 20 classes were offered, a frequently emailing pair would send each other emails after at least 13 classes.

mentors and number of classes held. These two schools also had the highest percent of students who met the email and event attendance benchmarks (see full report for details). On the other end of the spectrum, iMentor had the lowest implementation levels at Redwood, which had a low match rate and the lowest percent of students who met the email and event attendance benchmarks.

Table ES-1 also shows that, overall, iMentor was better able to meet its school-level standards for matching students with mentors and the number of classes held than for emailing rates and event attendance. iMentor met its expectations for matching students with mentors at two evaluation schools, approached expectations at four schools, and missed the benchmark at two schools. iMentor held enough classes at all eight schools to meet the benchmark. On the other hand, no schools exceeded or were approaching the email benchmark, and just one was approaching expectations for event attendance.

Because our evaluation only includes eight schools, it is difficult to empirically link specific school characteristics with implementation outcomes. However, it is worth noting that the two schools with the strongest implementation also had the highest attendance rates. School attendance is an important prerequisite for participating in the iMentor program, because the class takes place during school hours; this is also the time when PCs encourage students to email their mentor and to attend events. Of course, other factors could influence how well iMentor implements the program at particular schools. Please see the full report for a discussion of some of these factors.

How Are Key Program Activities Associated with the Strength of Mentee-Mentor Relationships?

Our study of iMentor's implementation for 10th graders found that students were matched with mentors at relatively high rates, mentors reported being well supported, and students had the opportunity to attend iMentor's weekly class. However, we found that many students were not interacting with their mentor via email and events as much as iMentor intends. To explore the implications of this finding, we examined how the quantity and type of mentee-mentor interactions were associated with the strength of mentoring relationships. We looked at whether students who interacted with their mentor more—by emailing, attending events, texting, or talking on the phone—had a closer relationship with their mentor than peers who engaged in less of these activities. We found that:

- Having informal interactions (i.e., texts and phone calls) had the strongest association with relationship closeness. Texting and talking on the phone were associated, to a statistically significant degree, with having a closer relationship, using reports of relationship quality from both mentors and mentees.
- Increasing the number of events attended also had a statistically significant, positive association with relationship closeness.
- Increasing the frequency of emailing had a relatively weak association with relationship closeness, which is perhaps not surprising, given the challenges related to emails (described in the full report).

It is important to note that we assessed *associations*, not causality. We cannot be sure whether pair interactions drove relationship closeness, or vice versa, or if both are really connected to some other pre-existing characteristic of students—e.g., those who are most likely to participate fully in the program may have strong social skills and the ability to develop relationships. Still, we believe that these analyses are useful because a central part of iMentor’s theory of action is the idea that the program activities lead to strong relationships, which later provide a basis for preparing students for college success.

As our evaluation progresses, we will continue to investigate links between iMentor’s key activities and the quality of mentee-mentor relationships.

Discussion

The students participating in our evaluation of iMentor’s College Ready Program are now moving into 11th and 12th grades. As our work continues, we will be able to examine how students who are part of iMentor perform on the program’s target outcomes, such as non-cognitive skill development, college knowledge, and the ability to navigate the post-secondary process, compared to similar students without the program. We will also look at whether closer relationships between students and mentors predict greater improvements on these outcomes.

Past research has shown that a close relationship with an adult mentor can act as a vehicle to improve students’ academic outcomes and help develop important life skills. Through this evaluation, we will learn if the activities in iMentor’s College Ready program can foster this type of strong relationship—and sustain it over four years—and whether these relationships help students build the skills and knowledge they need to be well prepared for college.

Notes

¹For example, see Nagaoka et al. (2015) and Bayer et al. (2013).

² See full report for more details on the mentor survey.

³ The iMentor curriculum includes multiple lessons on critical thinking.

⁴ See full report for more details on the student survey.

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