

Community Integration Mentoring Program

What is the cause of this problem/gap and why does it persist?

I identified a social concern and studied a group of students (English Language Learners (ELL) in the New Haven Community). For these students, the inability to fully communicate limited them academically and socially. It was evident that the language barrier influenced how the students' intelligence was perceived, which led their fellow classmates and educators to question their intellectual capacity. As a result, the English Language Learners' self-confidence was lowered, preventing them from being an active member of society.

While some ELLs are immigrants and newcomers to this country, the majority of ELLs enrolled in U.S. schools are born in the U.S. and are therefore American citizens. New Haven Public Schools gives these students up to 30 months of help in a bilingual setting, but many students complete the 30 months unable to be at their academic level of English. This is due to the fact that they are never completely submerged in the American culture nor the need to communicate in English. As a result, this becomes a long-term societal issue rather than something that could have been solved early in life or by the end of the 30 months period. In a way, it contributes to the increasing population of students who dropout of school and never dream to reach a college-level education.

Mission Statement:

Through a nurturing peer environment, the Community Integration Mentoring Program (CIMP) provides young New Haven English Language Learners (ELL), the opportunity to develop their English by interacting with students from neighboring communities to encourage them to become active members of society. CIMP also promotes integration among communities, by creating a symbiotic relationship and cultural learning experience between the communities involved. Additionally, mentors participating in this program become role models for the ELL students and leaders in our society. As a byproduct, this program also has the ability to build multicultural bridges and close gaps between various communities.

Benefits:

CIMP provides the ELL students with role models of relatively close age, allowing for deeper connections to develop between the groups. The mentors help support the students' English developments in fun and non-traditional ways, in a small group setting. The students are provided with personalized lesson plans that work to specifically develop each child.

Originally, the main objective of this program was to help develop the English language for ELL students. However, as soon as the program took off, it was evident that the benefit was reciprocal. I witnessed how mentors benefited tremendously from being a part of the program. The fact that the mentors were being immersed in a community much different than their own, with multiple backgrounds, religions, and ethnicities, definitely taught everyone to be more informed and understanding of other cultures. The interaction between these groups of people will hopefully contribute to making our society more socially aware and caring for their fellow people.

Background:

It became my mission to assist in the development of the ELL students' English proficiency to help improve their academics, social skills, and mental health in order to quicken their integration into society. With this project, I soon learned that standardized teaching methods were minimally beneficial for the young ELL. Additionally, I understood that building connections and understanding the students' backgrounds were essential tools in enhancing their learning.

The essence of this program is the concept of "kids helping kids" and empowering each other to become active in their communities, the process inevitably helps to build connections between the students and mentors. This project solidified my belief that as members of this society, it is our responsibility to be sensitive to different needs and learn to accept our differences. We can better help others if we understand where they come from. This also happens to be the case in education. Not all kids learn at the same pace or by using the same method. Therefore, the CIMP mentors first work on building strong relationships with the students to get to know them on a more personal level and with this, be able to provide a personalized education tailored to the needs of each student. For the past sessions, the ELL students and the mentors were able to reach a great level of comfort. There were times when the students relied on their mentors as their extended support system and felt comfortable enough to share very personal stories; which at times, were unimaginable for many of the mentors. This

helped create even greater bonds among all the students. The mentors looked forward to seeing the students on Saturdays and were always received with open arms.

Although CIMP's main focus is to help English Language Learners, the learning curve is reciprocal. With this program, we are integrating very different communities. In this initial case, we paired Guilford mentors with New Haven students. Even though the communities involved are less than half an hour away, they are close to opposites. New Haven schools have a high population of minority students, primarily from a Hispanic or Black background, while Guilford is a community that lacks diversity. In Guilford, social issues are not as prominent, of those in New Haven. Therefore, participating CIMP mentors were exposed to a much more diverse community with multiple backgrounds, religions, and ethnicities. But more importantly, CIMP creates awareness among the mentors for situations they may not ever endure and social matters that are not normally prevalent in their environment. Overall, this program helps mentors broaden their cultural knowledge and increase their appreciation of issues that others may suffer.

We human beings are not who we are just because of our biology and background. We are influenced by our environment and the people around us. In this way, Americans have a gift, as we can experience the world cultures in one same country. It is essential that we take advantage of the great diversity our country has to offer: the different cultures, religions, ethnicities, and races. This will lead to the understanding that our diversity is our strength, not our weakness or our divisiveness. As members of this society, it is our responsibility to learn about our differences and above all, respect people's beliefs as if they were our own. Acceptance and respect for these beliefs are what empowers our nation to be united and caring. The interaction provided by the CIMP program will help create an appreciation for others' cultures, and an opportunity to build a stronger and more united community which starts with knowledge fueled by respect and ends in understanding.

Target population:

It is important that the mentors continue to be students, as the main approach to this project is "kids helping kids". Although most of the recruitment was done by word-of-mouth, I have reached out to the Guilford soccer community as well as the Guilford middle schools and high school to advocate my program. Mentor participants of the CIMP are between the grades of the sixth grade and twelfth grade. CIMP was well accepted among the Guilford student community, as they were willing to volunteer their Saturday mornings to help other students become successful in school and in life. So far, this program has touched the lives of 27 mentors and 35 English Language Learners.

How:

Mentors meet at Exit 57 @ 8:30 am on designated Saturdays to drive to Saturday Academy at Fairhaven Middle School

The Saturday and Technology Gaming Academy is a free extracurricular activity that the New Haven school system offers to students in elementary and middle school to develop their math, reading, technology, and interpersonal skills. The support of the Saturday Academy's faculty continues to be essential for the CIMP. A large number of students that attend the Saturday Academy are ELL, making it very convenient for this program to function. The ELL students' progress and the program's future improvements are evaluated after each session.

It is my intention to expand my program to surrounding communities. Recently 2 mentors of the East Haven community joined our effort. Also, I will be looking to formally implement the CIMP within the New Haven and Guilford school systems. In order to ensure the program's existence and continuation as long as there is a need.

Sustainability

CIMP is a volunteer-based program that relies on student participation. CIMP's issue is not so much a financial problem, but an awareness of absence. In the near future, I hope to make CIMP more official with the support of the Board of Education from the New Haven and Guilford community. I am an active member of the Guilford community and have connections with the soccer club and the town's schools. This will allow me to continue advocating my program to future generations. Thanks to Guilford Foundation, there is currently \$800 in the CIMP fund. As my program grows and if it requires it, I am willing to reach out to different organizations or entities to help me support the program. I am also willing to organize events to help with this effort.

Inspiration:

After the devastating hurricane in Puerto Rico, people on the island were faced with many difficulties. Many people were forced to leave everything they had behind. The US, especially CT, had opened their doors to help people from Puerto Rico who were seeking to rebuild their lives. A new start is difficult for everyone, particularly hard for the children of these families who had to integrate into a new school system where they were not able to communicate. Back in January 2018, I had the opportunity to attend an event organized by ARTE Inc. that was tailored for the newly arrived Puerto Rican families to the New Haven Community, after the hurricane. This event was an eye-opener in helping me realize the importance and need of

integrating ELL students to our society in a timely manner. This became my main motivation to create a solution to help solve this social matter.

To further my knowledge...

In order to learn more about the New Haven community and the English Language Learners, in addition, to be of a support system for the mentors participating in the program, I volunteered my time at the New Haven Board of Education. I take the public bus after school from Guilford to the New Haven Board of Education (BOE) building, where I work with Daniel Diaz, the parent coordinator for the district. I use my time at the BOE to further my knowledge regarding matters and life situations the ELL students may experience such as bullying, homelessness, and immigration issues.

Through my program I have been able to make connections with the New haven based Non-profits, Collab and Arte Inc in where I have had the opportunity to intern and participate within the organizations. Collab works to accelerate Connecticut's entrepreneurial leaders to shape our communities from within and as the Community-Outreach intern, I am able to expand my network with local entrepreneurs. Arte Inc is dedicated to developing and promoting Latino culture and education. Arte serves disadvantaged urban youth, those with limited resources, who don't have access or exposure to their suburban peers. I have had the opportunity of participating, interning, and volunteering within these organizations.

Logistics:

CIMP relies on the availability of student volunteers. Essentially, my team changes on a weekly basis depending on who will attend the session. For each session, there are typically six to eight mentors. As part of the program, it is essential to build strong relationships between mentors and ELL students. We, therefore, work in ratios of 1:1 or 1:3 for the students to obtain the best relationship with mentors. Mentors are asked to take notes about each session, including the students' strengths and weaknesses, as well as tips to approach the students' needs. The students' progress is kept in a spreadsheet to be reviewed by mentors before each session. These notes allow me to better customize the individualized lesson plans for the following sessions, which

allow for quicker development. To better develop the lesson plans, I have also reached out to many educators in the districts to help me develop the lesson plan, making them more enjoyable and beneficial to the children. My family has been extremely supportive through this entire process. My younger brother is currently acting as a liaison to help to recruit at the younger ages, while my parents help with the logistics of making my program possible.

Number of Members:

In total there are many people who contribute to CIMP's success (Daniel Diaz, Christopher Fry, Thomas Woodard, Michael Mazzacane, Mrs. Lopez, Monica Abbott, Heriberto Cordero). To this day, over the past 3 years, the CIMP has impacted the lives of more than 40 mentors and 45 New Haven English Language Learners.