

**Evaluation of the  
DYCD YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program**

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## Executive Summary

Since January 2012, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) has been implementing a mentoring program funded by the City's Young Men's Initiative (YMI). Launched in New York City in 2011, YMI is a cross-agency initiative aimed at relieving the disparities in outcomes between young Black and Latino men and their peers in areas related to education, health, employment, and criminal justice. The DYCD YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program targets youth in fifth through ninth grade who are at risk of dropping out of school. The mentoring program operates in 25 Cornerstone Community Centers located in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) facilities and operated by nonprofit provider organizations. Each Cornerstone center receives \$32,000 in YMI funding to serve 12 mentees. The mentoring program is overseen by a mentor coordinator in each center and delivered in a group format, with up to four youth working with an individual mentor for at least one and a half hours each week.

At the request of DYCD and of the New York City Center of Economic Opportunity, which oversees the implementation, performance monitoring and evaluation of the majority of YMI programs, Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA) conducted an evaluation of the YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program during the 2013-14 school year. The purpose of the evaluation was to examine the youth experience in the mentoring program and assess ways in which the program helps participating youth develop skills that will enhance their social-emotional well-being and educational and career outcomes. The evaluation examined patterns of mentoring program participation, program practices that promote participant growth in three main outcome areas—attitudes toward school, engagement in learning and social-emotional development—and the successes and challenges of the mentoring program. Key findings and related recommendations are summarized below.

### Patterns of Participation

- ***The mentoring program primarily serves Black and Latino males in fifth through ninth grade, as intended.*** The large majority of mentoring participants in school year 2013-14 were Black (59 percent) and Hispanic/Latino (35 percent). Overall, more than three-quarters of mentoring participants were male (77 percent). Thirteen of the 25 programs also served female participants.
- ***Mentoring participants are more engaged in Cornerstone programming than their peers who are not enrolled in mentoring.*** On average, mentoring participants attended 397 hours of Cornerstone programming between July 2013 and March 2014, excluding hours engaged in mentoring activities, compared to 174 hours attended by nonparticipants.
- ***The retention rate in the mentoring program is higher than retention rates typically found in traditional afterschool programs.*** Forty-three percent of mentoring program participants were in their second year of mentoring compared

to, for example, 35 percent of middle-grades youth who continued over multiple periods in DYCD's Out-of-School Time initiative.

## **Mentoring Program Impact Levers**

Evaluators identified four programmatic tools or practices used in the mentoring program to promote participant growth—dialogue, role modeling, trips and academic support. The ways in which each of these practices supported participant outcomes are summarized below.

- ***Dialogue***—formal or informal processes for discussing issues pertinent to middle school youth—was consistently present in the programs as mentors were charged with engaging participants in relevant, age-appropriate conversation. Identifying and discussing age-appropriate topics was the most common dialogue practice occurring in the mentoring programs.
- ***Role modeling***—the act of representing a caring, successful, and admirable adult figure for youth—served an important, necessary example for mentees. Mentors reported that a primary responsibility was to serve as a strong, positive adult example for the mentees, and that as educated adults they helped to reinforce the value and importance of school and education among mentees. Mentors also helped mentees learn how to navigate the complicated terrain of race and class, and, importantly, to build and sustain positive relationships with adults.
- ***Trips***—excursions away from the neighborhood—were a regular part of the mentoring experience. Staff and mentees commented that the trips offered through the mentoring program were a big draw for participants. The trips were an integral component of the mentoring program in that they augmented recruitment and retention in the program, provided enriching experiences that engaged and exposed participants to new ideas and environments, and provided a means for mentors and mentees to strengthen relationships and bond.
- ***Academic support***—including tutoring and homework help—allows program staff to set high academic expectations for mentees while encouraging them to try their best and reinforcing the importance of education. Mentor coordinators and mentors reported that they expected participants to go to school and do their homework, communicating these expectations to mentees by checking in with them frequently about their school work.

## **Mentoring Program Impact**

- ***Mentoring program participants reported positive attitudes about their abilities to do well in school and beyond, compared to non-mentoring participants in the Cornerstone afterschool program.*** Mentoring participants were significantly more likely to report high levels of belief in the importance of school and

confidence in their ability to succeed in school than were Cornerstone participants who did not participate in mentoring.

- ***Mentoring program participants are engaged in learning experiences.*** Mentees were more likely than non-mentees to report that they often participate in enriching field trips and activities to help them learn about jobs or careers.
- ***Mentoring program participants had very positive perceptions about their mentor and reported high levels of trust and positive relationships with their mentor.*** In addition, mentees were more likely to report that they were able to talk with adults about things that bothered them than were other Cornerstone participants.

## Recommendations

Mentoring program staff identified five structural support features as vital to achieving the goals of the mentoring program: resources, flexibility to structure their programs, passionate and motivated mentors, support for mentoring program staff, and meaningful relationship-building opportunities with mentees. The most common challenges across mentoring program sites were recruiting and retaining mentors, aging out youth participants, and meeting the need for female mentoring while addressing the primary goals of the YMI mentoring initiative to enhance the outcomes of young Black and Latino males. As such, the evaluation team offers the following recommendations:

- Identify additional ways to recruit mentors through local community events and venues, and explore additional program partnerships with social work and education programs in local community colleges that provide volunteer mentors with college credit.
- Compile and disseminate a city-wide list of mentoring programs that participants can “age into” when they are no longer eligible for the YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program.
- Clarify guidance to programs on the issue of female participation in the mentoring program, and consider growing mentoring programs focused on girls to respond to the strong interest and need for mentoring among girls while maintaining the integrity of the YMI program goals for boys.



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## Overview

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) funds Cornerstone Community Centers located in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) facilities and operated by nonprofit provider organizations, which offer a range of services to both youth and adult residents. Cornerstone centers offer a range of programming to youth and adults, including afterschool programming that includes homework assistance and recreational and enrichment programming. Since January 2012, in conjunction with the afterschool programming 25 of the Cornerstone centers have been implementing a mentoring program funded by the City's Young Men's Initiative (YMI). Launched in New York City in 2011, YMI is a cross-agency initiative aimed at relieving the disparities in outcomes between young Black and Latino men in areas related to education, health, employment, and criminal justice. The YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program, hereafter referred to as "the mentoring program," targets youth in fifth through ninth grade who are at risk of dropping out of school.

Each of the 25 Cornerstone centers receives \$32,000 in YMI funding for the mentoring program and serves 12 mentees. A designated mentor coordinator works with the center director to implement the program. Mentoring is delivered in a group format, with up to four youth matched to an individual volunteer mentor, and occurs for at least one and a half hours each week. Each center has flexibility to customize the specific design of the mentoring program based on the needs of the youth served and the local context. Further, DYCD provides guidance to the centers and supports on-site technical assistance from The Mentoring Partnership of New York, a nonprofit organization aimed at growing mentoring capacity in the City. Mentoring program staff have the opportunity to attend periodic training and networking events hosted by The Mentoring Partnership of New York, receive print materials around effective mentoring practices, and receive one-on-one support from a staff member with specialized training in mentoring.

Mentoring activities vary across programs, but typically include group discussions, sports, field trips, meals, academic support, and community service projects. Moreover, mentees are generally recruited from the roster of Cornerstone afterschool participants: depending upon the center directors' and mentor coordinators' discretion, participants may be identified based on a perceived need, or the program may accept applications on a first come, first served basis. Through the mentoring program, youth develop relationships with positive and caring adults who support them in school and in life, with the ultimate goal of keeping youth on-track to graduation and prepared to go on to college and successful careers.

According to mentor coordinators and administrators at DYCD, program mentors are recruited from a variety of arenas. Most of the mentors are Black and Latino men with some connection to their local Cornerstone program: some are staff members in nearby schools or housing facilities, while others are adults who grew up in the surrounding neighborhoods and are now working professionals. Some members are hired through the online volunteer-matching site, NYC service. Additionally, 12 of the mentors participate in a youth-mentoring course at The New School, and are placed as mentors in one of the 25 Cornerstone centers through a partnership with DYCD. All mentors must successfully complete a criminal background check with fingerprinting. Mentor coordinators receive centralized training from DYCD at the

beginning of the school year, and in turn train their mentors using materials provided by The Mentoring Partnership of New York.

The focus of this report—and of data collection—is on the experiences of mentoring program participants, rather than on the characteristics, qualifications, or experiences of mentors. By identifying and discussing four primary impact levers<sup>1</sup> (*dialogue, role modeling, trips, and academic support*) that promote participant growth in three main outcome areas (*attitudes toward school, engagement in learning and social-emotional development*), this report describes how programmatic decisions and practices are leveraged in pursuit of creating safe, positive and developmentally-appropriate youth experiences. Throughout this report, the mechanisms by which the mentoring program contributes to participant outcomes are unpacked through program examples.

## Study Methods

Policy Studies Associates (PSA) conducted an evaluation of the YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program during the 2013-14 school year that explored the following questions:

1. What are the patterns of engagement in the mentoring program? How often are youth participating in mentoring activities? What are patterns of retention in mentoring?
2. In what ways does the mentoring program help participating youth develop the skills and dispositions needed to navigate the transitions to middle school, high school, and careers? How does participation in mentoring affect youths' attitudes towards to school, engagement in learning, and social-emotional development?
3. What are the differences in these skills, dispositions, and attitudes for youth participating in the mentoring program compared to other Cornerstone participants in the same grades who do not receive mentoring?

As described below, the PSA evaluation team collected data through surveys, interviews, and analysis of data collected by Cornerstone centers on program participation.

- **Youth survey.** A machine-scannable survey was administered to 1,829 Cornerstone participants in grades 5-9 in the 25 centers with a mentoring program in May 2014. Survey data were received from 19 centers. Within these 19 centers, 611 of 1,447 enrolled Cornerstone participants in grades 5 through 9 (42 percent) responded to the survey. Of these 611 participants, 206 (34 percent) identified themselves as a mentoring program participant.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, we define “impact levers” as programmatic tools or practices that could impact participant performance on any of the desired outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> Evaluators created a survey administration list using data extracted from DYCD Online, the agency’s participant-tracking system, selecting participants enrolled as of January 2014 with parental consent for participation in evaluation.

- ***Interviews and focus groups.*** In May 2014, evaluators visited five Cornerstone centers, one in each of the five New York City boroughs, selected by DYCD based on three criteria: (1) geographic diversity, (2) full enrollment in the mentoring program, and (3) the mentoring coordinator had been with the program for more than a year. Evaluators interviewed Cornerstone directors, mentoring coordinators, and mentors, and conducted focus groups with both YMI mentoring participants and youth in grades 5-9 who did not participate in mentoring.
- ***Enrollment and participation data.*** Cornerstone programs track enrollment and participation in center activities, including in the mentoring program, in DYCD Online, the agency’s management information system. In April 2014, evaluators requested an extraction of these data for all Cornerstone participants in grades 5-9 who were enrolled during the 2013-14 school year, including both mentoring and non-mentoring participants.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the report, statistically significant differences between mentoring program participants and other Cornerstone participants in grades 5 through 9 were identified in analyses of participation or survey data, using a threshold of  $p < 0.05$ , evaluators compared the effect size to measure the strength of the finding. For categorical variables, effect size is measured by Cramer’s  $V$ ; for continuous variables, evaluators computed a Cohen’s  $d$  measure of effect. Conventions for educational research suggest that effect size values between 0.10 and 0.20 indicate a “meaningful” association, and 0.21 and 0.50 indicate an “important” association, and values of 0.51 or higher indicate an “impressive” association (Cohen, 1988; Lipsey, 1990).

## Patterns of Participation

The evaluation team analyzed program enrollment and participation data for all youth enrolled in a Cornerstone center during the 2013-14 school year in grades 5 to 9, the core group eligible to participate in mentoring activities. For these participants, analyses examined data spanning two program years (from September 2012 through March 2014), to determine the extent to which youth remained engaged in Cornerstone and in mentoring across multiple years. Though the program model is designed to serve youth in grades 5 to 9, some programs were found to serve some youth outside of that age range. However, these analyses focus only on the targeted population of youth in grades 5 to 9, and analysis of retention accounts for participants who would have aged out of the program (i.e., participants who were expected to have progressed to the tenth grade during the 2013-14 school year).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The number of program hours offered and participant attendance are entered by Cornerstone staff. Because staff may not have completed data entry at the time of evaluators’ request, the recorded participation data may not be a reflection of actual participation in Cornerstone activities.

<sup>4</sup> The retention rate is calculated based on the number of youth who returned to the center divided by the number of youth who were not expected to have aged out (i.e., participants in grades 5 through 8 during the 2012-13 school year).

## Characteristics of Mentoring Program Participants

The mentoring program is designed to support youth in fifth through ninth grade and centers are expected to serve twelve mentees, focusing recruitment on young men of color, reflecting the overarching goals of the citywide YMI initiative. During the 2013-14 school year, 232 youth in the 21 Cornerstone centers for which data were available participated in mentoring activities, averaging 11 youth per program.<sup>5</sup> The large majority of these mentoring participants were Black (59 percent) and Hispanic/Latino (35 percent). Five percent were identified as another race, and one percent as Asian. As shown in Exhibit 1, mentoring participants spanned all targeted grades, with the fewest participants in ninth grade.

**Exhibit 1**  
**Grades served by the mentoring program, 2013-14**  
**(n = 232)**

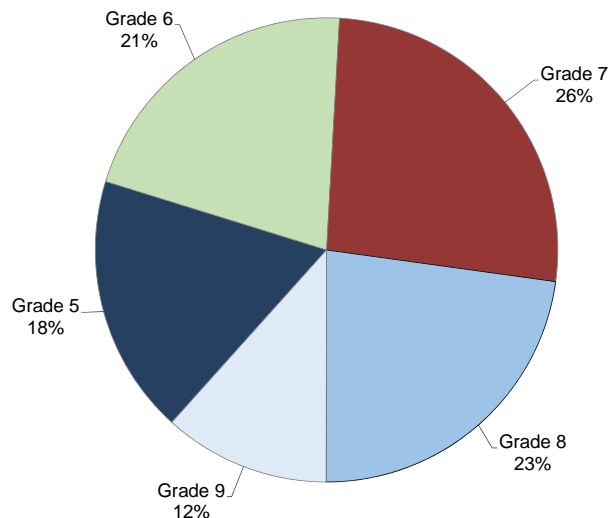


Exhibit reads: Eighteen percent of 2013-14 mentoring program participants were in the fifth grade.

Although mentoring is focused on young men, centers were given flexibility to also enroll female participants. Of the 21 programs that entered participation data, 13 served female participants (ranging from 5 to 20 percent of mentoring program participants). Across all centers, more than three-quarters of mentoring program participants were male (77 percent).

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<sup>5</sup> PSA requested data only for Cornerstone participants in the target grade range; youth who were outside of the target grade range but who may have participated in mentoring activities are not included in analysis. Youth were considered mentor program participants if they attended at least one mentor program activity during the school year. At the time of the data extraction, four programs had not entered participant-level data for mentor program activities; these programs were excluded from participation analyses.

## Level of Program Engagement

The mentoring program expects mentors and mentees to meet for at least one and a half hours each week, with additional activities, including field trips and community service outings, scheduled throughout the year. Programs are also expected to offer summer programming but can adjust the frequency to accommodate mentor schedules and other summer programming. Assuming a standard of one and a half hours per week, the evaluation team estimated that mentoring programs should have offered a minimum of 58 hours of mentoring activities between the period of July 2013 and March 2014, the period of focus for analyses.

Of the 23 centers that recorded participation hours during the study period, 13 offered at least 58 hours, and 10 of these programs offered more than 80 hours of mentoring activities between July 2013 and March 2014. Twelve centers recorded fewer than 58 hours of mentoring offered. Across all centers, mentees attended mentoring activities for an average of 27 hours from July 2013 through March 2014; the average range of hours attended spanned from a minimum of four hours in one program to a maximum of 67 hours in another. It is important to note that activity and attendance data are entered by Cornerstone staff; it is possible that not all centers had completed data entry at the time of the data request.

Analysis of participation data also suggests that mentoring participants were more engaged in overall Cornerstone programming than their peers who were not enrolled in mentoring. On average, mentoring participants attended 397 hours of Cornerstone programming between July 2013 and March 2014, excluding hours engaged in mentoring activities, compared to 174 hours attended by nonparticipants, a statistically significant difference at the  $p < 0.01$  level (effect size = 0.75).

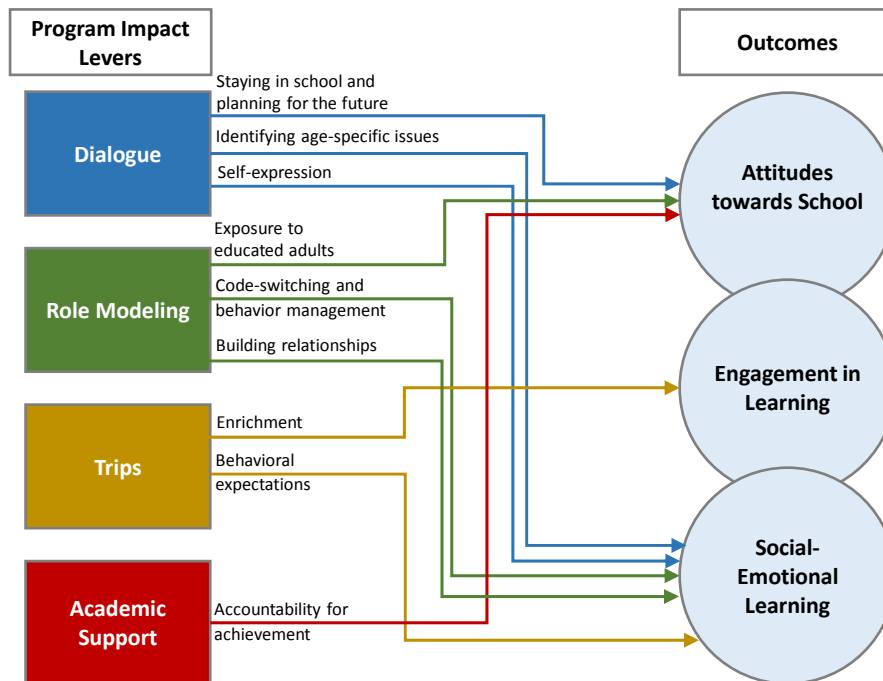
In addition, in the 2013-14 school year, 60 percent of mentoring program participants were in their second year of Cornerstone programming, compared to 26 percent of nonparticipants in the same grades ( $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.23), suggesting high retention rates. Furthermore, 43 percent of mentoring program participants were in their second year of mentoring, indicating high levels of retention in the mentoring program. To put this in context, these rates are higher than rates of other afterschool programs serving youth of similar ages. For example, a recent analysis found that 35 percent of middle-grades participants in New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development OST program in the 2012-13 school year remained in the program over the course of multiple program periods.

## Mentoring Program Impact Levers

Based on initial analyses of survey and interview data, the PSA evaluation team identified program impact levers—or programmatic tools or practices—that mentoring programs use to effect participant growth in three targeted outcome areas: (1) attitudes toward school, (2) engagement in learning, and (3) social emotional learning (see Exhibit 1). This report describes how mentoring programs deployed the following primary impact levers: *dialogue, role*

*modeling, trips and excursions* and, to a lesser extent, *academic support*. The report describes the nuances of how these levers are mobilized by mentors and staff, as well as how mentees experience these levers in action. The arrows in Exhibit 2, below, represent the ways through which the impact levers can lead to program outcomes, as identified in the analysis discussed below.

**Exhibit 2**  
**Mentoring program pathways**



## Dialogue

When asked about the role of mentors in Cornerstone programs, adult interviewees (including center directors, mentor coordinators and mentors) agreed that an important part of a mentor’s job was facilitating and participating in conversations with mentees. *Dialoguing*—the formal and/or informal process of discussing issues pertinent to the lives and experiences of middle school-aged youth—emerged as one of the primary impact levers deployed in mentoring programs. Though the structure and nature of dialoguing varied across sites, the purposeful use of dialogue was consistently present as mentors were charged with engaging participants in relevant, age-appropriate conversation.

***Dialoguing in the mentoring program.*** In the Cornerstone centers visited for this evaluation, dialoguing occurred both formally and informally, and could be explicit or embedded in an activity, based on the needs and desires of the center’s mentors and mentees. Across centers, mentoring programs were structured so that mentees met as a group on a weekly basis to complete a planned activity or engaged in an unstructured “check-in” before or after participating in a recreational activity. One center director explained:

*Mentors will sit with the guys for about a half hour, just touching base with them, chat with them, and then they'll head over [for] one of our open gym programs [...] and then they wind up shooting basketball together...It's cool because they get to interact a little bit on their level. [Participants] are meeting with [their] mentor and [they're] having dialogue and then [they're] also...bringing the mentor into [their] world.*

Cornerstone staff reported that dialoguing occurred on an as-needed basis, often concurrently with a recreational activity. If a mentor saw that a participant was in need of assistance, he might pull the youth aside for a one-on-one conversation. Adult interviewees noted that incorporating dialoguing practices into recreational activities and trips allowed youth to bring up and casually address issues without over-formalizing the process. As one center's mentor coordinator noticed, one-on-one interactions in recreational settings:

*...give us an opportunity to talk about things [the mentees] won't talk about in the group. Sometimes you have that one-on-one connection for that reason...then you can use it to support the group conversation so that everybody can get involved—especially if it's something like bullying or something. [For example,] if somebody's hungry, why is that important to all of us? But without naming names or pointing fingers.*

In this example, the mentor coordinator described using one-on-one, casual interactions to serve two purposes: first, attending to mentees' more sensitive needs that may not be accessible in the bigger group discussions. Second, the content of these interactions informed larger group conversation so that mentors could, without causing embarrassment or singling out individuals, address pertinent topics that impact mentees' lives.

Regardless of the structure of when dialoguing occurs in the program, participants are comfortable talking to their mentors and mentor coordinators: in survey responses, 90 percent of mentoring participants reported sometimes or often talking to their mentors when they have problems with school, while 80 percent of mentees reported sometimes or often talking to mentors when they have problems at home.

Analyses of interview data reveal that dialoguing tends to serve three primary aims across centers: (1) mentees identify and discuss age-appropriate issues and topics, (2) mentees learn about and practice self-expression, and (3) mentees discuss and consider the importance of staying in school and plan for academic and personal futures. In these ways, dialoguing addresses the outcomes emphasized by the mentoring program.

***Social-emotional learning.*** Identifying and discussing age-appropriate topics was the most commonly cited dialogue practice occurring in the mentoring programs. Staff and participants at the five centers visited for the study highlighted the importance of this kind of conversation, with mentees frequently noting that discussing issues “that matter” to them was one important benefit of participating in mentoring. Though a number of topics emerged across sites, both adults and mentees highlighted several “frequent-flyer” issues: bullying, sexual health, and relationships with family and friends topped the list.

While many such conversations occurred between mentors and mentees in direct, planned ways, more sensitive issues often got more traction when embedded into another activity. For example, at one center, a mentor coordinator planned to address the topic of family relationships and support. He implemented an activity in which mentees were asked to draw a circle, write the names of friends and family who were supporting them outside the circle, and write the names of individuals whom they believed they supported on the inside of the circle. Mentees were then asked to write letters to one individual inside and one individual outside their circles. In this process, they had to identify what elements of support were important to them, as well as listen to their peers' experiences and perspectives. Though the conversation did not explicitly address building support networks, the exposure to peers' experiences enabled an opportunity for reflection on the necessary elements of peer-to-peer and familial relationships.

Concurrently with these conversations about pertinent issues, mentees also learned *how* to tackle tough topics through effective and positive self-expression tactics. When probed about mentoring activities, mentees frequently mentioned that they felt empowered to bring up issues (again, generally bullying and relationships) that were weighing on them with their mentors. Mentors, in turn, were able to step back to help parse mentees' feelings while suggesting practical ways mentees might address an existing problem or approach potential situations. One mentee described talking with his mentor about being bullied at school, and trusting his mentor's counsel. He observed:

*[My mentor] would explain to me two wrongs don't make a right. He was the first person that I heard that from. He told me two wrongs don't make a right and I said, "How is that possible?" And he really broke it down to me and explained, "If somebody is bullying me, I don't go back and bully them. I just tell the teacher or something like that. Talk to them. Say what's up."*

In group settings, mentees were also able to bounce ideas off one another—at once both *practicing* self-expression while simultaneously crowdsourcing positive, healthy solutions. In one focus group, the evaluation team witnessed mentees practicing their self-expression skills to support one another over shared experiences as victims of bullying.

*Mentee 1: When I was in fourth grade I used to get bullied because for some reason, this kid picked on me because I was Dominican, which made no sense to me.*

*Mentee 2: That's racist.*

*Mentee 1: Exactly. For me, because I was Dominican, he would make fun of me at my desk. [Mentee describes a scuffle between the two.] Well, me and him both [sic] got in trouble so I learned not to let people...take advantage.*

*Mentee 2: You got to let [bullies] know you're not playing and this is really hurting you. They're taking it too far. One thing that I learned from [a mentor] that I had in the afterschool program is that once bullying, it doesn't even have to be bullying itself, but once it just starts, it's enough. It's too much.*



The mentees in this interaction used dialoguing skills to discuss complex and frustrating situations they experienced as young men of color. Their dialogue was supportive as it identified a bullying experience and corroborated that the interaction was not okay. The second mentee validated his peer's experience while also suggesting an alternative way to handle the problem. As a result of these kinds of experiences, mentees across all centers agreed in survey responses that the YMI mentoring program provided a unique, safe setting in which these self-directed dialoguing sessions could come about naturally and productively: 94 percent of mentees said their Cornerstone participation helped them communicate with their friends better than before, while 92 percent said they were better able to manage conflicts between friends and classmates.

***Attitudes toward school.*** Mentors often noted that one of their roles was to reinforce the importance of staying in school. In addition to serving as real-life examples of how school can help lead to success (see the Role Modeling section of this report), adult interviewees reported performing regular check-ins with participants about how school was going. These check-ins serve a dual purpose: first, they create an opportunity to identify challenging social situations which may be occurring at and disrupting school success, which can then get addressed productively (see bullying example above). Second, over time, the check-ins help mentors observe when mentees' commitment to school and education may be flagging. Mentors may then intervene, helping mentees problem-solve around academic concerns, identify resources, and reinforce the value of staying in school and achieving a degree.

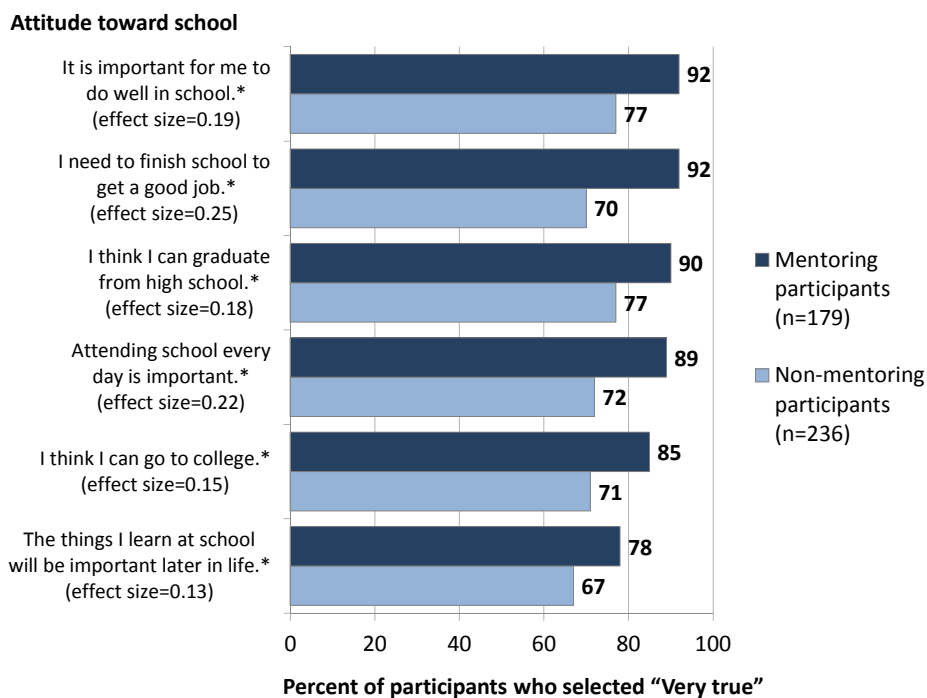
One mentor described building a relationship with his mentees' teachers, and receiving regular academic updates. He noted, "I have conferences with some of their teachers and they let me know if they're doing good or not in school...they give me a report and it has to be signed by the parent and by the student and by the teacher. That [allows me] to see if there's any problems that might occur or what can we do to solve the problem, if there is one." Though not all mentors described formalizing the follow-up process in that way (see the Academic Support section of this report), mentees identified the importance of staying in school as a relatively common lesson and takeaway from the mentoring program. One mentee described getting advice from his mentors about next steps in school. He shared,

*I talked and asked [my mentors] which college is better for me, because I want to get into a good college, I want to be able to get a good job in the future. So they usually help me and inspire me [by asking] "What do you want to do in life?" I'm still a little confused but I'll find out eventually and they were trying to help me, pushing me, "What do you like to do? What's one of your good classes in school that you have 100 or 90 in?" And they're telling me, if that's what you like to do, do it. Follow what you like to do. Don't think because someone wants you to do something else, you have to do that. Do what you want. [Talking with mentors] inspires me to do things better in school, so they're helping me find my path.*

Survey data revealed that these types of conversations may be having an impact on youths' attitudes towards school. Indeed, as illustrated in Exhibit 3, mentoring participants were significantly more likely to report high levels of belief in the importance of school, needing to finish school to get a good job, attending school, doing well in school, as well as confidence in

their ability to graduate high school and to go to college than were Cornerstone participants who did not participate in mentoring.<sup>6</sup>

### Exhibit 3 Attitudes towards school among Cornerstone participants, by mentoring status



\*Indicates a statistically significant difference.

Exhibit reads: Ninety-two percent of mentoring participants said that it was “very true” that it was important for them to do well in school, compared to 77 percent of Cornerstone youth who did not participate in mentoring. This difference was statistically significant, with an effect size of 0.19.

## Role Modeling

In addition to dialoguing with participants, mentors serve as important, necessary role models for mentees. Mentors agreed that a primary responsibility was to serve as a strong, positive adult example for the mentees. *Role modeling* – the act of representing a caring, successful, and admirable adult figure for youth who may not have one – is another program impact lever deployed in mentoring programs. As one mentor explained,

*My priority is really just to guide them in that path from being a boy to becoming a man, I think. I think now, in this generation, they need strong role models. You have Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, President Obama. You want them to look and be*

<sup>6</sup> As reported earlier, in general mentoring participants attended significantly more hours of Cornerstone programming than did non participants. It is possible that differences in survey responses of mentoring participants and nonparticipants are due to differing levels of engagement in Cornerstone programming overall, not mentoring specifically.

*inspired of what the world has today, and when they see somebody [from their own community] that has done well in the past, or, like I tell in my stories, that I traveled for basketball and by getting there I [succeeded]. It makes [my mentees] feel like, "Wow, I can do this as well."*

The need for role models is clear. Among mentoring program participants who responded to the survey, 37 percent reported that they were sent to detention in the last year, 34 percent were sent to the principal, and 19 percent - nearly one in five - were suspended from school. By comparison, 31 percent of non-mentees reported that they were sent to detention, 25 percent were sent to the principal, and 15 percent were suspended (these differences are not statistically significant). The presence of an aspirational role model in mentoring programs provides an opportunity for mentees to envision what a successful future would look like and to be encouraged to take steps to reduce delinquent behaviors. One mentee illustrated this point by saying, "I decided to be in the mentoring program because I do not have a parent to look up to, so I decided to come here so then they can help me with my life and my problems. I can tell them stuff that's personal, and [hear] what kind of tips [my mentor] has for me for the future."

***Exposure to educated adults.*** Though the practice of role modeling serves many purposes in the mentoring program, interviewees frequently mentioned that exposing students to educated adults served to reinforce the value and importance of school and education. Aside from the explicit conversations about the importance of school (see the Dialogue section), adult interviewees felt that they served as real-life examples of how staying in school reaps later benefits, and the mere fact of being present and visible could open up previously un-thought-of options for mentoring participants. As one center director said, "I want them to learn... that they have more options than what they see." Mentors acknowledged this responsibility and saw part of their job as displaying their experience for mentees. One program mentor noted, "When I tell them, oh, I've been to Europe. They say, 'Oh. We want to go. We want to do that. I want to study abroad.' So I tell them, 'You can do anything you want to do. Just put your mind to it.' And I tell them if [they] need recommendation letters from me, I'm always there to write something or be there for them."

Either by virtue of observing mentors or through extended conversations, mentees appeared to be absorbing the message that they can succeed. Eighty-five percent of mentees reported that, since they started coming to the Cornerstone center, they believed it was "very true" that they could succeed in middle school, compared with only 69 percent of their Cornerstone peers who were not in the mentoring program ( $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.20). Additionally, 75 percent of mentoring program participants said that it was "very true" that they have more ideas for future jobs since coming to Cornerstone, compared to 59 percent of their non-mentee peers ( $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.15)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, mentees saw their mentors as capable of providing good advice on education and jobs. When asked about his conversations with his mentor, one mentee noted, "I discuss what I want to do in the future because I plan to go to college... so I usually talk to them about which college I should pick or what things I should major in, what I should do that he thinks would be better for me... Sometimes he tells me 'this college is good. I went to this college.'"

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<sup>7</sup> These findings, along with responses to other similar survey items, are illustrated in Exhibit 6 at the end of this report.

**Code-switching and behavior management.** Mentors are more than representations of educational aspirations. The evaluation team's interviews with both adults and youth revealed an important trend across sites: mentors were helping mentoring program participants learn how to navigate the complicated terrain of race and class by developing and practicing a system of *code-switching*. A term originally coined by linguists, code-switching refers to the practice of shifting ones' language and behavior to reflect and capitalize on the interaction context and setting. For mentoring program participants, code-switching may happen formally (for example, navigating between use of Spanish at home and English at school) or informally (such as affecting different social behavior in different social situations). Though these skills are seldom taught explicitly, academic and professional success for young men often hinges on their ability to code-switch – a reality that is particularly important for young men of color.

In this vein, adult interviewees expressly highlighted their role in helping youth learn to manage and redirect behavior in order to better code-switch. One mentor described focusing on shaping youths' language and behavior. He noted,

*Clothing wise, [youth are wearing] baggy jeans, baggy clothes. I just explain to them about just presenting yourself well. Looks can go a long way as well. **I tell them if you're going to work with baggy jeans [...] and you want to be looked at as a thug and hoodlum, that's what you're going to get.** So a lot of them now come in with their hats off, [observing a] language barrier, not saying F you, using the N word. That's been a big thing because sometimes it slips out because when they're in school -- of course, we're different from their classmates. Of course, they're around their friends, language is a big issue. But around us now it's less and less to where they hardly use it at all.*

This mentor's observation was necessarily specific to his population of mentees. As young men of color, he noted, he knew from his own experience that his mentees were vulnerable to the real-world repercussions of racism and classism such as increased attention from police and disadvantages on the job market. He saw his role as helping his mentees combat these institutional inequalities to the best of their ability by adjusting and managing their affect and behavior to better navigate the world around them, which he viewed as essential to success in life. He continued:

*Saying yes sir and no sir, yes ma'am, no ma'am [goes a long way]. You'd be surprised how far you could just go with that. "Yes. Please. Thank you." Just proper etiquette is the most important and what I [try to focus] on... I've gone a lot of places and far in life just by being polite to people and just having interests -- **knowing about the world.**" And I just tell them, "You want to get far, these are the things you have to do."*

In addition, the evaluation team observed multiple instances of mentees code-switching or describing the experience of adapting their behavior to be appropriate in different settings. Mentees also frequently discussed how they learned in mentoring to manage their anger or rage, to take deep breaths or try to find another venue for their frustration. The impact is clear: both youth and adults believed that their participation in the mentoring program had positively impacted their ability to manage their behavior.

***Building relationships with adults.*** Perhaps the most important contribution of mentors, though, is that of role-modeling how to build and sustain relationships with adults. This theme emerged over and over again as interviewees expressed the belief that simply *being* a caring, present adult figure made the most lasting impact. When asked why he believed mentees stay engaged in the program, one center director observed, “I think the bonding experience encourages them to participate. I think the fact that they have an older person of their own ethnic background or own experience or somebody who can say, ‘yeah, I was hungry like you.’ Or, ‘I knew.’ Things of that nature that [the mentees] can relate to.”

When surveyed, mentees confirmed that they were building relationships with their adult mentors. Mentoring program participants had very positive perceptions about their mentor. More than four out of five participants said that it was “very true” that their mentor: thinks they can do things well, really cares about them, always tries to be fair, cares about what they think, and helps them try new things (See Exhibit 4). When asked to summarize his experiences with mentors, one mentee put it succinctly, “Usually, my mentor feels like another parent but a fun one.”

**Exhibit 4**  
**Mentoring program participants’ perceptions about their mentor, (n = 162)**

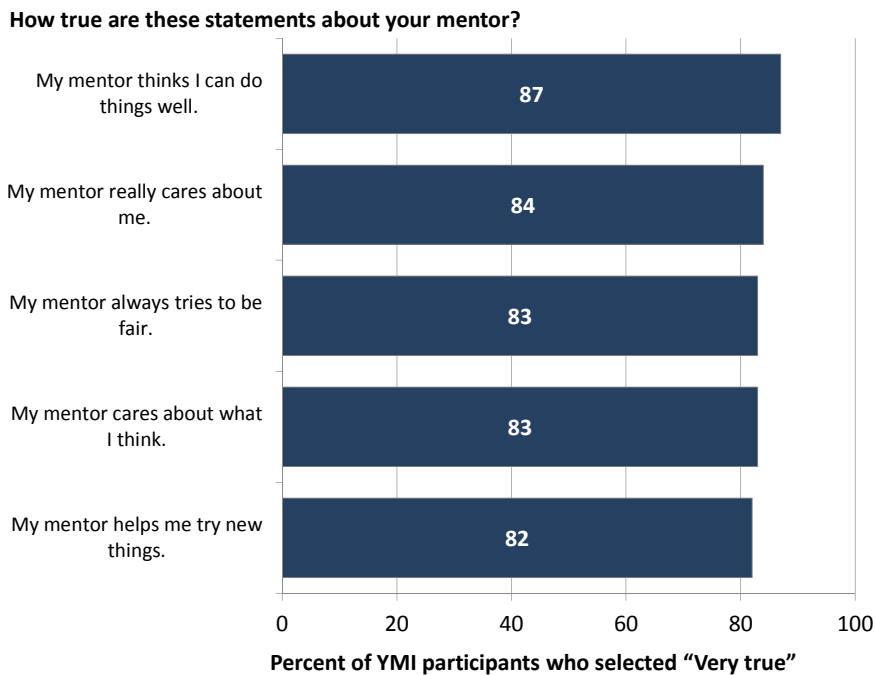


Exhibit reads: When asked about their mentor, 87 percent of mentoring program participants agreed that it was “very true” that their mentor thinks they can do things well.

Further, mentees reported being able to express themselves more with adults than did non-mentees. Survey data showed that mentoring program participants were more likely than

nonparticipants to think that the Cornerstone program has helped them talk more with adults about things that bother them (61 percent versus 46 percent, respectively,  $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.16).

## **Trips**

When asked in interviewees what mentees liked best about the program and what enticed them to continue to participate, both staff and mentees commented that the trips offered through the mentoring program were a big draw for participants. Taking enriching and recreational excursions away from the neighborhood is a regular part of the mentoring experience. Many of the trips are organized by DYCD for the entire City's mentoring population, including several participant favorites like "A Night at the Museum" – a sleepover program at the American Museum of Natural History inspired by the feature film of the same name – and a trip to Radio City Music Hall to view the fifth round of the NFL draft. Participants and mentors also mentioned planting trees in Staten Island, ice skating in Rockefeller Center, and going to a theatrical production of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* on Broadway. Survey data showed that a significantly higher proportion of mentoring participants than other Cornerstone participants said that they participate in field trips at their Cornerstone center (64 percent versus 49 percent, respectively,  $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.16).

In addition to trips organized by DYCD as part of the mentoring program, many centers also used part of their \$32,000 annual budget to plan additional trips for the mentoring program, typically organized by the mentor coordinators. The trips generally occurred on Saturdays and took place twice per month, though the number of trips varied from site to site, and from one month to the next, depending on schedules and interest. The trips included a strategic mix of cultural enrichment activities, such as a trip to Cirque du Soleil, and recreational activities, such as a sporting event or a trip to Dave and Busters' Arcade.

The trips are an integral component of the mentoring program in that they augment recruitment and retention in the program, provide enriching experiences that engage and expose participants to new ideas and environments, and provide a means for mentors and mentees to strengthen relationships and bond.

***Recruitment and retention.*** Mentoring program staff and participants alike shared that the trips were a highlight of the program and a key component in driving attendance and retention. YMI staff believed that while it was important to offer trips that were culturally enriching, it was equally important to offer trips that would get the participants excited and interested. They noted that participants might be reluctant to try something new and unlikely to engage in the program unless the staff could also offer them an opportunity they knew the mentees would like, such as going to a water park, as a negotiating tool to push them into trying new experiences and encouraging them to take part in other activities they might otherwise not want to do, such as homework.

Mentoring program staff were thoughtful about using trips as an incentive to get participants to come to the program and to meet certain behavioral expectations. For example, one mentor coordinator shared that mentees could not go on trips if they missed more than one

mentoring session in a month. Another mentor coordinator explained that mentees could not go on a trip if they were not meeting behavior expectations in the program, such as using appropriate language, and a third said that trips were sometimes used as an incentive for participants to do their homework. Across all sites, mentees were most likely to say the trips were one aspect of the program they liked best. “I joined because of the trips” was a common refrain heard from mentee interviewees.

**Engagement in learning.** Mentor coordinators reported planning trips with learning goals in mind. For example, tree planting in Staten Island was an opportunity to ride the Staten Island Ferry, learn a skill, and participate in community service. Mentor coordinators and Cornerstone directors reported being thoughtful about balancing fun activities with enriching experiences that would expose mentees to new experiences that they would otherwise not have. Two commented:

*One time I said, ‘okay guys, so we’re going to have to take the ferry to go to the show.’ It was like, ‘why do we have to take the ferry? I’ve never been on the ferry before, are you kidding me?’ It was an issue. It was an issue that we had to wake up early, that we had to get the metro cards, that we had to spend 30 minutes on the ferry ride, and that’s when it clicked. No, we’re going to go on the ferry. We’re going to take the buses and we’re going to walk around, and we’re going to learn how to take the train. And we’re going to expand ... our perspective on the world that we live in. This is New York.*

In this instance, the coordinator used the trip as an opportunity to practice a skill that would enable participants to take advantage of the resources that the City has to offer. Despite participants’ reluctance, the coordinator used the need to travel to the trip as a teachable moment to expose mentees to more of their world. Along those same lines, another mentor commented on the decision to use program funds to expose mentees to unique cultural experiences:

*We generally pick things that we think are going to be enriching. For example, we sent our kids to a Cirque du Soleil trip when that was in town. Super expensive. I mean, right, for myself to go to Cirque du Soleil, I have to think about my budget. Can I afford to take my whole family? It’s that type of stuff that we say hey, these kids need to go to. If we can’t afford it, they can’t afford it for sure. We need to take them. So we try to give them some experiences that kind of match their interests, but also things that we think would be enriching to them.*

**Social-emotional learning.** Mentors and mentees often lauded the trips as an opportunity to get to know their mentor/mentee on a personal level. One mentor said of the experience, “It took the trips for us to get a bond. The kids were able to see us be fun people. I had to bring the kid out of me to warm them up.” Mentors who could not attend the trips as often as they would like because of conflicts lamented the fact that they were missing out on these opportunities to “hang out.” Mentees spoke positively about every opportunity they had to just “hang out” with their mentor. Mentees in more than one focus group agreed that if they could change one thing about the program, they would want more time to spend with their mentor.

Mentor coordinators and mentors talked about being intentional about using the trips to build relationship skills, and behavioral skills. For example, a rock-climbing trip, while fun for participants, also provided an opportunity to practice teamwork. Though certain activities such as ice skating or bowling could take place at a nearby location, program staff intentionally chose to take students to another borough away from home to expose them to unfamiliar settings outside of their comfort zone and help them gain confidence navigating new experiences.

## **Academic Support**

Cornerstone centers offer homework help and, in some cases, tutoring for all afterschool program participants. Mentees and non-mentees both reported receiving academic support through structured time for homework help during the afterschool program. However, the mentoring program offered participants the benefit of additional academic support and follow-up on an as-needed basis. In survey data, although most mentoring program participants (59 percent) reported attending school “most” days, fewer than half (38 percent) said they attended school “all” days. By comparison, 54 percent of non-mentees reported attending school “most” days, and 43 percent said they attended school “all” days (these differences were not statistically significant). The extent to which mentoring programs focused on academic support and follow-up varied by center. However, mentoring program staff from all five centers visited for this study talked about the importance of academic support for mentees. One mentor coordinator shared,

*I really want to focus on academics. That’s my priority – academics. They have to do well in school. I want that for the kids; they respect that. We see the report cards. We want the kids to let us know where they need help. Usually the staff can help, but I may need to find external tutors.*

Center directors and mentor coordinators reported that it could be a challenge getting the mentees to focus on academics in the mentoring program and that they have had to be creative in integrating academic support into the program. For example, academic support might happen informally as a check-in during other conversations. Mentors ask mentees how school is going. They look at report cards. Some mentors talk to teachers. If mentors see that students are struggling, they will typically discuss the issue with the mentor coordinator and develop an individualized intervention plan. That might mean one-on-one homework help with the mentor, finding tutoring, or talking with the teacher or parent. One mentor gave a typical example of how mentors approach academic support. He said, “I’ll check their homework. Talk about the assignment. What needs to be done? How can we strengthen this? What are areas we might want to build upon?”

Mentoring program staff shared some stand out examples of ways in which mentees have benefitted from academic support. For example, one participant was at risk of failing the eighth grade. The mentor coordinator and mentor decided to focus heavily on academics with that one particular mentee. The mentor coordinator explained,



*With one kid in the group, academics were not very strong. There was a chance of him not graduating. We implemented a plan in which he had to show us his report cards and come every day to do homework. Our goal for him was to raise his average GPA and graduate on time. And the student is going to graduate on time. It's very exciting. He went from a 55 to 72.9 GPA.*

At another center, a mentor shared an example of how he helped one of his mentees get placed out of special education.

*I had one kid who wasn't doing too well in school. He was placed in special ed. Because I sit down with him and make sure that his homework is done, his grades are improving and they took him out of special education.*

**Accountability for achievement.** Further, program staff set high academic expectations for mentees to encourage them to try their best and reinforce the importance of education. Mentor coordinators and mentors reported that they expect participants to go to school and do their homework. As highlighted in the previous examples, they consistently articulated those goals to youth and held them accountable. Both staff and mentees articulated ways in which the expectations were communicated. Mentees talked about how mentors followed-up with them by continually asking them about their homework and asking to see their report cards. One mentee said it was like having another parent, to support and offer encouragement rather than get angry if expectations are not met. While there are generally no consequences if mentees do not complete their assignments or improve their grades, several mentees across sites mentioned not wanting to disappoint their mentors.

Several mentees across sites shared examples of how the mentoring experience helped them improve their grades or understand an assignment. One mentee said,

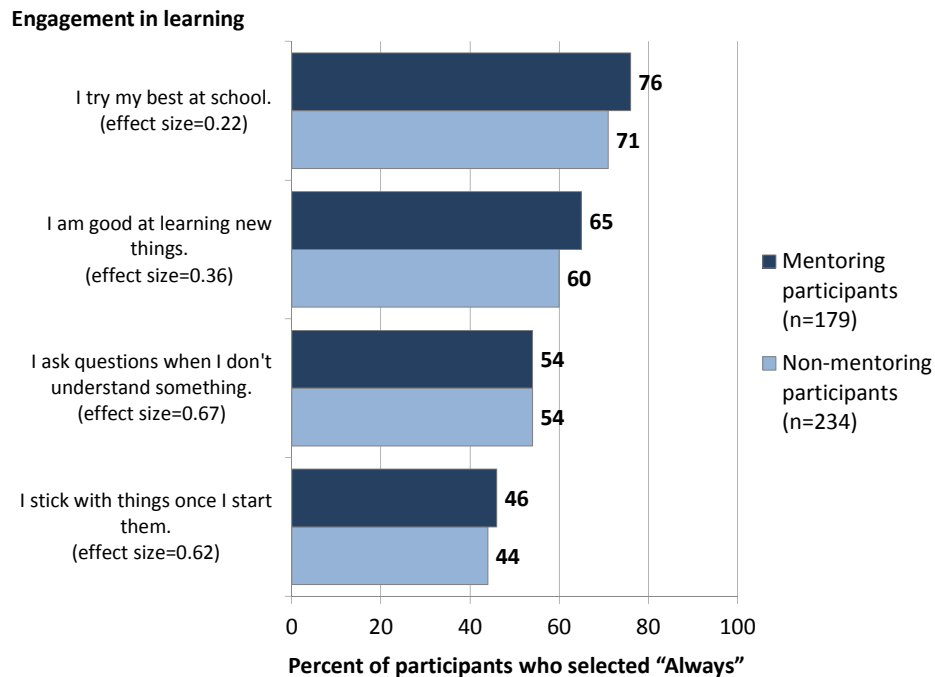
*My grades in math have gone up since our mentor thing. I hate doing homework but—yeah—he tells me what happens if you don't pass, if you don't graduate, you won't achieve some stuff. That got to me.*

**Improved engagement in learning.** Survey data suggest that the academic support and encouragement from their mentors is having a positive effect on participants' engagement in learning. More mentees than non-mentees reported that in the Cornerstone program they learned study strategies that helped them a lot in school (65 percent versus 46 percent, respectively,  $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.18). Also, as previously shown in Exhibit 3, an overwhelming majority of mentees agreed that it is very true that attending school every day is important (89 percent,  $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.22), and agreed it is very true that it is important to do well in school (92 percent,  $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.19), a statistically significant difference from non-mentees.

Similar to non-mentees, more than half of mentoring program participants reported that they always try their best at school (76 percent), are always good at learning new things (65 percent), and always ask questions when they don't understand something (54 percent), as shown in Exhibit 5. In comparison, 71 percent of non-mentees reported that they always try their best at schools, 60 percent said they are good at learning new things, and 54 percent said they ask

questions when they don't understand something (these differences are not statistically significant).

### Exhibit 5 Engagement in learning among Cornerstone participants, by mentoring status



\*Indicates a statistically significant difference.

Exhibit reads: Seventy-six percent of mentoring program participants reported that they “always” try their best at school, compared to 71 percent of Cornerstone youth who did not participate in mentoring. This difference is not statistically significant, with an effect size of 0.22.

## Successes and Challenges of the Mentoring Program

In order to deploy the program impact levers highlighted above, mentoring programs have utilized structural supports that help enable successes, while also encountering challenges related to implementation. This section of the report discusses the features of the mentoring program that facilitate ongoing achievements, reflects on ongoing concerns and arenas for future improvement, and presents a summary of the positive changes experienced by mentees.

### Structural Supports for Mentoring Programs

Interviews with Cornerstone directors, mentor coordinators, and mentors revealed recurring themes of structural features of the program that staff believed intensified their ability to achieve program goals and support youth. As described below, some of the most frequently mentioned features that staff felt were vital to achieving their mission: ample resources, flexibility to structure

their programs, passionate and motivated mentors, support for mentor coordinators and mentors, and meaningful relationship-building opportunities with mentees.

**Resources.** Some Cornerstone directors mentioned that the mentoring program is unique in that it is supported by one grant that provides ample resources to operate independently through one funding stream. Consequently, directors felt that the financial structure of the program allowed for a more autonomous, cohesive program than a traditional youth program supported by a diversity of funds with divergent goals and program reporting requirements. One director said of the mentoring program, “Because it's actually a program that's funded completely by itself [...] there's enough resources there to provide a nice program.”

The autonomy to spend money with more flexibility than the typical city-funded youth program allowed centers to meet participants' interests and provide resources and meals that they felt the participants needed. For example, one center planned an activity in which the mentors took the mentees to buy school supplies in September. Directors and mentor coordinators at all five sites mentioned frequently buying food for mentees, which both provided for those participants affected by hunger and contributed to program retention. Center directors and mentor coordinators explained that the Cornerstone center is an important resource for many of the youth. One mentor said, “Once they're here, it's hard to get them out of the building. It's a second home for them.”

Survey data supported the notion that mentees have the opportunity to participate in more resource-intensive activities than other Cornerstone participants. In particular, mentees were more likely than non-mentees to report that they often participate in field trips (64 percent versus 49 percent, respectively,  $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.16), which provide enrichment and learning opportunities, and in activities to help them learn about jobs or careers (55 percent versus 37 percent,  $p < 0.01$ , effect size = 0.19).

**Flexibility in program structure.** Although there is a basic structure for mentoring programs that was evident across all centers visited by the evaluation team, it was also evident that each program made adaptations to accommodate scheduling challenges, mentor talents, mentee interests, and other center-specific needs. Center directors reported that, as with any youth program, what worked well at one center might not work well at another and they appreciated the ability to adapt the program with more flexibility than they generally have with other youth programs. For example, at one center, one of the mentors was a college student at NYU and was a good tutor. Although that one mentor worked with his small group of mentees as required by YMI, all mentees in the program had the chance to work with him and get tutoring while his group of mentees went with another mentor to do recreational activities and have discussions. At another site, mentors and mentees met as one large group before splitting off into small group sessions. And at two sites, small group mentoring sessions happened on different days based on when mentors were available and the mentees only met as a large group for trips.

Center directors and mentor coordinators mentioned making changes to the program in response to feedback from mentees. One center director explained that she believed that the flexibility to respond to mentee interests helped with retention. She said,

*We have flexibility so we can change the structure when they say they don't like this or that. [...] When we can listen to them and respond, they feel heard and they stay so I think that flexibility helps with retention.*

***Passionate and motivated mentor coordinators and mentors.*** Mentor coordinators and mentors in the five centers visited by the evaluation team had a diversity of academic and professional backgrounds. However, passion and motivation about the mentoring role was a common characteristic evident in all mentor coordinators and mentors who participated in interviews. Directors at four of the five centers hired mentor coordinators who had already demonstrated their passion for youth at the Cornerstone center and had a relationship with the mentees because they were already on staff at the center. Center directors and mentor coordinators also reported that passion for youth and mentoring was the most important characteristic to look for when recruiting mentors, and they described being deliberate about selecting mentors willing and motivated to take on the demands of the role without compensation.

*[One mentor], he's just a good guy. [...] he really loves that mentor role. He has children at home. He's a great dad, and I think he carries that skill over here. [...] So for me, it's a case where you hire for passion versus hiring a skill set.*

*You don't have too many men who are willing to do this. I don't want people who aren't dedicated.*

Additionally, all five mentor coordinators interviewed often went above and beyond the duties of their role. They all had some level of involvement in mentoring with the mentees and also often helped out at the Cornerstone center in other capacities. One mentor coordinator helped with drama activities and acted as the Administrator on Duty for the Cornerstone program. He also led a second 90-minute weekly mentoring session with the mentees as one large group, supplementing the small-group sessions. One mentor coordinator said he helped out wherever he was needed in the afterschool program and often stayed late into the evenings. He said, "It's not my job, but I like to help out. [...] I'm here for the kids." Mentor coordinators reported filling in as substitutes when mentors couldn't make it to their session and attended all of the trips.

From the perspective of mentoring program participants, mentors are different from other Cornerstone staff in that they are there voluntarily and the group ratios are small, allowing for more personal attention. The mentees picked up on these differences and reported in the survey and in interviews that they felt that the mentors really cared about them and wanted to help them. Eighty-four percent of mentee survey respondents reported that it was "very true" that their mentor cared about them. Below is a sample of mentee interview reactions to questions about what they thought of their mentors and what they liked best about the mentors.

*They care more. They are more patient with us even if we are having a rough day and [we are not on our best behavior]. They try to be nice to us and talk it out with you instead of trying to yell at you or scold you for what you did.*

*Staff have a lot of kids to teach. Mentors have less kids to teach so they pay attention to you more.*

*Usually, you know, people they just can't deal with us. [The mentors] are different. They are more active. They like to play with us. Instead of just watching you, they play with you.*

**Support for mentor coordinators and mentors through training, peer networking, and appreciation.** Another strong attribute of the program voiced by staff and mentors was the support available to them through resources from The Mentoring Partnership of New York, and support and appreciation on-site at the Cornerstone center. Center directors, mentor coordinators, and mentors had positive reviews of the training, technical assistance, and peer networking opportunities available to them through The Mentoring Partnership of New York, as illustrated below.

*The main guy that leads that initiative, he's awesome. He's come out to the site a couple of times. He's met with me, my staff, and he's also provided trainings for the mentors to go to. And they've gone to I think two trainings each. And they all come back with good feelings about that. So if this is the point for me to give props to anybody, the technical assistance provider is really good. [...] He's just chock full of resources. I mean, if you ask him for resources that are good – trips that are good for improving bonding between a mentor and a mentee – he's like, “this is perfect. I've got these five sites in Manhattan, here's a couple of places in Queens you could go to.” Just very quick and very knowledgeable. –Center Director*

*The training is good. We were provided with two resource manuals with icebreakers, a booklet with activity ideas. [...] Activities worked well with the kids. [...] [The training was] helpful in that it really defines what the role of the mentor is. –Mentor*

*I've been getting trainings from The Mentoring Partnership of New York and that's been a great help in terms of resource, in terms of meeting with other mentor coordinators and working out any issues that we have in our program; sharing what works, what doesn't work and also sharing activities. –Mentor Coordinator*

Across all five centers visited, mentors reported feeling supported by the Cornerstone staff and the mentor coordinators. One mentor said of his experience, “staff here are very much like family. They'll see me working with young people and they encourage me. I feel supported in a lot of different ways.”

Given the voluntary nature of the mentor position, mentor coordinators felt that support and appreciation for the mentors was important to boosting morale and facilitating retention. For example, one mentor coordinator shared,

*Because it is volunteers I can't give them monetary rewards. But I like for them to feel appreciated. We give out certificates. We'll have a dinner. We'll take pictures and have a celebratory event. [It's a time to be] proud of what we've done and thank them for what they are doing. The trips are a benefit for them as well.*

***Mentor-mentee relationship-building opportunities.*** Across all five centers visited by the evaluation team, directors and mentor coordinators talked about the primary importance of building positive relationships between mentors and mentees. The primacy of relationship-building in the mentoring program was evident in interviews. Although mentors were only required to meet with their mentees for 90 minutes each week, interview respondents mentioned that the mentors often made the effort to spend extra time with mentees when they could, for example, by staying late at mentoring sessions. In another example, one mentor said he went to see his mentee perform in a school play. Mentors and mentees frequently reported wanting more opportunities to meet or talk outside of the weekly mentoring sessions and weekend trips.

At most of the programs visited for this study, there was at least one mentor who also worked at the Cornerstone center in another capacity. YMI staff and mentors acknowledged that the ability of these mentors to have extra time to get to know the mentees and interact with them was a strong asset to the program. One center director said of the advantageous arrangement, “They're trying to build this relationship. It's nice that they can be there for them whenever they're around.” For example, a mentor who only interacted with mentees during the weekly mentoring sessions noted the limitations to the relationship:

*I feel like I'm only available to them when I'm here for two hours per week. They can't come to me on their own. I would like to be more connected outside of the program.*

In contrast, a mentor who was hired to work as a full-time employee at the Cornerstone center after becoming a mentor explained,

*They see me a lot more now that I work here. Seeing them just on Saturdays was hard. I'm here a lot more. They've grown attached. We're like family. I care for them, and they know it.*

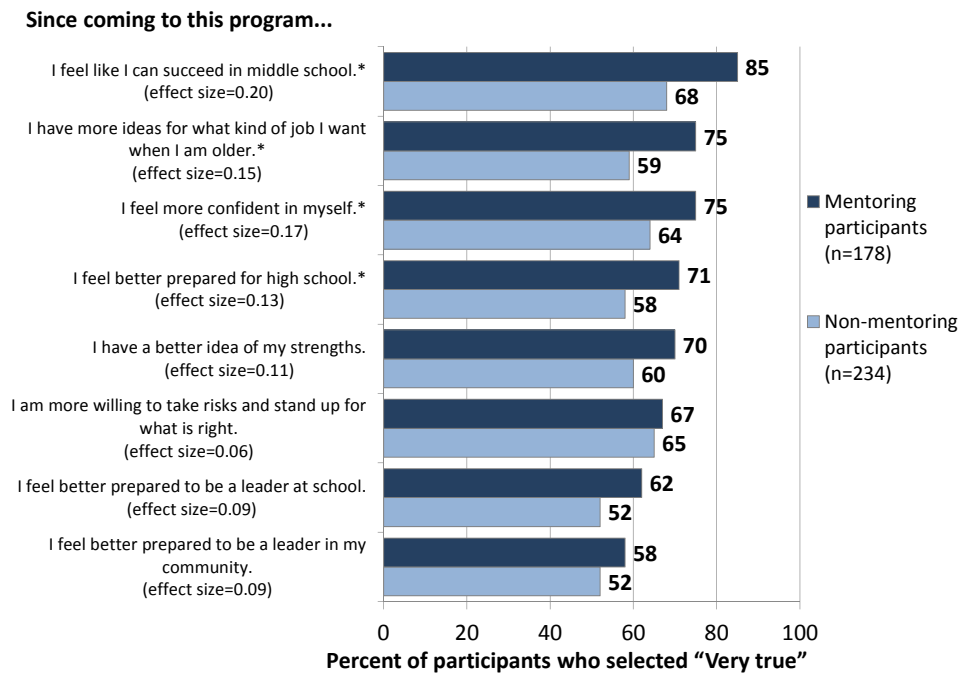
## **Summary of Mentoring Program Outcomes**

This report offers evidence that the YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program has contributed to improved attitudes toward school, engagement in learning, and social-emotional development for the participating mentees, based on findings from youth surveys and focus groups. In particular, a series of survey questions in which youth were asked to report on how the mentoring program has helped them develop positive outlooks and belief in their capacity to succeed highlighted the power of the mentoring program.

As shown in Exhibit 6, at least three-quarters of mentoring program participants reported that since coming to the program, it was “very true” that they felt like they could succeed in middle school (85 percent), that they had more ideas for the kind of job they would eventually like (75 percent), and that they felt more confident in themselves (75 percent). Additionally, more than half of mentoring program participants thought it was “very true” that they had a better idea of their strengths (70 percent), were more willing to take risks and stand up for what is right (67 percent), felt better prepared to be a leader at school (62 percent), and felt better prepared to be a leader in their community (58 percent). Mentees responded more positively to

each of these measures than did non-mentees. Statistically significant differences are indicated in Exhibit 6.

### Exhibit 6 Attitude changes among Cornerstone program participants, by mentoring status



\*Indicates a statistically significant difference compared to non-mentees.

Exhibit reads: Eighty-five percent of mentoring participants said it was "very true" that they felt like they could succeed in middle school since coming to the program, compared to 68 percent of Cornerstone youth who did not participate in mentoring. This difference was statistically significant, with an effect size of 0.20.

The impact of the mentoring program also reached beyond the participating mentees. In talking with Cornerstone center directors and mentor coordinators, it became evident that extracting program outcomes from overall Cornerstone center outcomes would be complex. In several instances, mentors were also Cornerstone Center staff. Consequently, mentors naturally continued their role with their mentees, and often with non-mentees to some extent, during other Cornerstone center activities. For example, one site director noted that mentees started to participate in other Cornerstone programming, such as the youth council and cheer squad, because their mentor was leading those activities. Also, since several mentor coordinators previously worked at the Cornerstone center in another capacity and continue to engage with non-mentees to some extent, mentees and non-mentees alike reported that the mentor coordinator was someone they often talked to for advice, though mentoring program participants were more likely to report doing so. One site director said of having Cornerstone staff as mentors, "It creates a boundary issue, of course, that I'm always trying to be aware of. But I think the dividends it pays in other ways far outweighs any boundary issue."

In addition, directors at some centers visited for this study noted that the positive behavioral transformations in mentoring participants had the effect of changing the culture of the

Cornerstone center as these youth learned to get along better with their peers and become role models themselves for younger peers at the Cornerstone center. One director said of the relationship between the two programs, “Talk to the kids. There was no love in this place. Mentoring has helped change the culture here. The energy is so light. It feels like a family. I would say YMI contributes to the culture.”

Thus, while it is clear from youth survey responses and interview data that the mentoring program is helping participants improve their attitude toward school, engagement in learning, and social-emotional learning, it appears that the positive youth outcomes also have the effect of fostering a more positive, familial environment that permeates into the overall Cornerstone center.

## Recommendations

As described in this report, mentoring program participants reported benefiting from the program. Center directors, mentor coordinators, and mentors also had positive reviews of the mentoring program and spoke highly about the structure and their perceived value of the program. Interviewees did not have many negative experiences to share and reported few, if any, barriers to achieving their vision of what the mentoring program should be. Nonetheless, interviewees shared a few common concerns where extra attention or guidance could be beneficial to strengthening youth outcomes. Although the concerns were not universal across all programs visited for the evaluation, interviewees most frequently discussed challenges with recruiting and retaining mentors, aging out youth, and balancing the needs for male mentoring with needs for female mentoring. In this section, we explain these challenges and offer recommendations as to how future mentor programming might address these concerns.

***Recruiting and retaining mentors.*** Cornerstone staff employed a variety of strategies to find mentors for the program, and some centers have had an easier time than others. Across the five centers visited for this study, most mentors recruited for the program had been with the mentoring program from the beginning, but a few dropped off for personal reasons or because the scheduling did not work. Recruitment and retention of mentors was the most frequently mentioned challenge. Two of the centers visited hired female mentors to work with male mentees when they could not recruit the male mentors they needed. One center director explained the challenge her center had finding mentors for the program:

*It's free [volunteer work]. Not everyone wants to give up long periods of time. We provide staff from [the Cornerstone] program to go on trips [when the mentors can't go]. [DYCD] has been helpful finding recruits [but] people would come for a few weeks do all of the documentation and disappear. It's hard to keep mentors – hard to get consistency.*

In interviews, center directors and mentor coordinators noted that DYCD has provided assistance in recruiting mentors, but reported mixed results about whether or not those recruits worked out over time. Center directors and coordinators reported success finding mentors locally, either by recruiting Cornerstone staff members or through personal connections.



Retention of these mentors appears to be more consistent, perhaps because of their personal connections and geographic proximity to the neighborhood and to the Cornerstone center.

In light of this challenge, the evaluation team recommends that DYCD and Cornerstone centers identify additional venues for recruiting potential mentors, including online platforms and advertising through local community events and institutions such as churches and gymnasias. DYCD might also consider exploring additional program partnerships with social work and education programs in local community colleges that offer volunteer mentors college credit, similar to the New School partnership. By building on these local resources and neighborhood connections, mentor coordinators may be able to recruit individuals already invested in their respective neighborhoods *and* retain mentors for longer tenures.

***Aging out youth.*** Several center directors, coordinators, mentors, and mentees shared concerns about what would happen to mentees as they age out of the mentoring program. Because the mentoring program only serves participants through the ninth grade, staff expressed concerns for how to continue to support students once they entered the tenth grade. Some programs are finding ways to keep mentees involved. For example, one program is training mentees to become mentors for the next group of participants, and two programs allow mentees to stay involved in the mentee sessions, though they cannot participate in the trips. Other programs are just starting to think about how to handle the transition.

One center director and mentor coordinator agreed that they worry that some of the youth aging out are just “not ready” for that lack of structure and accountability they get from checking in regularly with their mentors. The center director said,

*I have some kids leaving, and it weighs on me heavily. I am worried about letting them go. It seems like it's an early age to let them go. I think we let them go at a crucial time.*

Another director explained his concerns and thoughts about how to handle the transition:

*So one of the things that I asked my coordinator was to sit with [one of the mentors], being that he's a social work major. And asked them to really start thinking about what they're going to do for termination. I kicked out some ideas like thinking about some type of ceremonial thing that we could do; something that represents a graduation of sorts, a completion. And then of course, that leads to wondering about do we do an alumni mentee group? What does that transition into, like if they want to come back and help? So it's an interesting challenge.*

Some mentees also expressed concern about leaving the program. At one center, when asked what they would change about the program, one mentee said that he would change the policy so that they don't have to leave when they no longer met the grade criteria. Several other mentees in the focus group agreed.

In response to this concern, the evaluation team recommends that DYCD compile a city-wide list of mentoring programs that participants can “age into” as they graduate from the Cornerstone mentoring program. By providing mentor coordinators with reasonable, accessible

alternatives to recommend at the high school level, programs can both prepare youth for their future commitments while also assuaging staff and youth concerns about curtailing participation.

***Balancing male and female needs for mentoring.*** The mentoring program is addressing an important goal of helping young men of color reach their full potential and should continue to hone in on that mission through the mentoring program. However, it was clear from talking with center directors, mentor coordinators, and youth, that girls need and want similar support. Some of the centers visited by the evaluation team had integrated girls into the program and reported positive experiences, and at least one center was planning to add a female mentoring program to address the demand. It was also evident from conversations with program staff that they were not clear whether they were allowed to serve girls in the YMI mentoring program.

The evaluation team recommends that DYCD clarify guidance to Cornerstone centers on this issue, and consider expanding alternative mentoring programs. Although centers are indeed able to incorporate girls into the mentoring program if they wish, given both the value of the program to boys and the extent to which both female participants and center staff highlighted girls' desire to participate, DYCD should consider developing programming specifically for girls. This would meet the unique needs of female participants while also maintaining the integrity of the mentoring space for young men, consistent with the goals of the YMI participants.

## References

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