

TRENTON CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

High School Peer Mentoring Program

*by Rakima Stokes, Project Director for Communities in Communities
and Jenny Orten, Bonner Foundation Consultant*

Purpose

- Provides high school senior honor students with the opportunity to serve as Bonner Leaders, tutoring and mentoring freshmen during the Summer Bridge program and serving at community agencies during the academic year.
- Helps freshmen make the transition from middle to high school and increases their chances of staying in school by providing them with a free summer academic program as well as mentoring during the school year.

Background

The principal of Trenton Central High School had a vision for a program that would help ninth graders make the adjustment from middle to high school. The second largest high school in New Jersey, Trenton Central has approximately 3,000 students and a dropout rate of over 50 percent. Of the 1,200 students who enter as ninth graders, only 300 to 400 graduate. The majority drop out during or after ninth grade, with chances of graduation improving as they move beyond their freshman year. During this critical year, students need extra support. The nonprofit organization Communities in Schools was charged with designing a program to meet the diverse needs of rising ninth-graders by pairing them with rising seniors who served as their “mentor buddies” to give them a head start academically. In the summer of 2001 Trenton Central became the first high school in the country to host an AmeriCorps Bonner Leaders corps. This group of seniors became an integral part of the leadership and mentoring component of Communities in Schools’ Summer Bridge program.

How It Works

Summer Bridge

Summer Bridge is a free program held from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. for six weeks during the summer, offering academic support and enrichment activities to ninth-graders. During Summer Bridge, Bonner Leaders assist teachers in the classroom and teach their own classes using the Community Works curriculum of nonviolence and the Wave curriculum of job readiness skills. In addition, rising ninth-graders take math, English, and science courses taught by public school teachers. Each week, students take field trips to sites such as Princeton University, the Blacks in Wax Museum, the Baltimore Aquarium, the Philadelphia Art Museum, the U.S. Mint, local parks and beaches. In the summer of 2002 Summer Bridge served seventy ninth-graders with the support of nine Bonner Leaders.

Two weeks before Summer Bridge officially begins, Bonner Leaders start training, preparing, and planning. Every afternoon during the program, they meet for additional planning and reflection. After Summer Bridge concludes, Bonner Leaders spend two weeks preparing and planning for the school year. They also take a camping trip for further leadership development and community-building.

Bonner Leaders’ School Year Activities

In the fall Bonner Leaders continue their mentoring relationships with the ninth-graders through an after-school tutoring program, and they serve at several community agencies. They tutor elementary school children in the Get SET program at Westminster Presbyterian Church. They work with Crisis Ministry in Trenton and with the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. They also work with the College of New Jersey on a community-mapping research project.

The project director for Communities in Schools and the director of the Bonner Program at Trenton Central High offer students the opportunity to tour colleges on a one-week trip. In 2002, twenty-five

students visited Virginia's Norfolk University, UNC-Chapel Hill, and Duke in North Carolina, and the Atlanta Bonner Scholar colleges, Morehouse and Spelman.

What Makes The Project Unique

Bonner Leaders are from the communities they serve. The elementary school children they tutor might be their cousins and the soup kitchen clients may live on their block. They can gain an understanding of their potential to make a difference in their own communities by learning about and performing service in their community and school.

Benefits

To Bonner Leaders

Students gain exposure to college through other New Jersey Bonner Leaders, field trips, an education award, and experience that could help them get into college, perhaps at Bonner institutions. The mentoring experience encourages them to act maturely, gain leadership skills, and be good role models for their younger peers. Bonner Leaders teach ninth-graders real-life job skills during Summer Bridge and then practice those skills themselves at service sites, as they are accountable and responsible for themselves and their work duties. They also learn patience, time-management, decision-making, problem-solving, and mediation skills.

To Ninth-Graders

These students learn by the example of Bonner Leaders that they too can succeed in school and work. They get a glimpse of their power, potential, responsibility, and ability to give back to their communities. Ninth-graders reach out to twelfth-grade Bonner mentors with their problems, and they can relate to their older peers easily. In such a large school, this safety net of a trained older student who listens and can refer the younger students to teachers or counselors if needed can mean the difference between dropping out and remaining in school.

To the Community and School

Training students from the community to mentor other students from the same community increases the capacity of local people to accomplish learning and service goals. Service goals at local elementary school tutoring programs, soup kitchens, and food banks are met with the assistance of young students, who may be inspired to remain in their communities after college and work for further positive change. Retention at Trenton Central High is likely to improve as students are supported and encouraged to grow in leadership, mentorship, and service.

Resources And Partners

Communities in Schools

- Provides a comprehensive framework to help children succeed and stay in school. A project director at the school site brokers and coordinates support services and programs during the school day, as well as before and after school. The organization operates in 58 school sites and nine school districts in New Jersey.

Trenton Central High School

- Provides the space, books, funding, access to students, and vision.

The Bonner Foundation

- Provides monetary support to students, connections to Bonner schools across the country, and networking and training opportunities with other New Jersey Bonner programs.

AmeriCorps

- Provides academic awards and regional trainings.
- Mercer County Community College Youth College Gear Up
- Provides funding and sends students to the program.

Prudential Insurance

- Provides funding to Communities in Schools to operate the Summer Bridge program at Trenton

Central High School.

Evidence of Success

All mentors from the classes of 2001 and 2002 have gone on to post-secondary institutions both in and outside of New Jersey, to colleges and universities such as Drew, Rutgers, Rider, the College of New Jersey, Norfolk, Spelman, and West Virginia Wesleyan. Prior to becoming Bonner Leaders, many of these students had not done community service. All completed the required 300 hours while in the program and some completed up to 600 hours.

In the 2001–2002 school year, of the 150 ninth-graders who participated in the Summer Bridge program, none dropped out of school. Only two had to repeat ninth grade, and one transferred to an alternative high school. Many ninth-graders reported that they did much better in math because of the program.

Summer Bridge has infused Trenton Central High School with a spirit of enthusiasm for leadership and learning. Ninth-grade participants do not want to leave when the program finishes in the early afternoon.

How to Make it Grow

Expansion

Additional funding is currently being sought, with the hope that eventually the program could serve all 1,200 rising ninth-graders at Trenton Central High School. Summer Bridge could also expand to an all-day format with academic subjects in the morning and afternoon outdoor activities such as swimming, canoeing, arts and crafts, tennis, and basketball. This would be ideal since most students live in the inner city and do not have many opportunities to participate in activities outside the city. Additional field trips to colleges, museums, parks, and other places outside New Jersey would expose students to more educational institutions and keep them excited about the Summer Bridge program.

Including College-Level Bonners

Including college students would enhance the program. College-level Bonners would add a rich set of skills and experiences as they mentored Bonner Leaders who in turn would continue mentoring ninth-graders. Trenton Central High Bonner Leaders have participated in several one-day service events with college students in New Jersey, and they appreciate this time with college students to ask questions, meet diverse people, and network with fellow Bonner Leaders. Many campus-based Bonner schools search for strategies to involve community members more deeply in their service programs. A peer-mentoring program would forge a close partnership between college and high school students and administrators. It could also encourage high school graduates to apply to their hometown Bonner institution. Three Bonner Leader graduates of Trenton Central High enrolled in a Bonner college as Bonner Scholars in the fall of 2002. High school Bonner Leaders would gain valuable service and leadership skills that could help them succeed in college, perhaps at Bonner institutions across the country.