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## **LAUNCHING A MENTORING PROGRAM**

### **Laurel Woods Elementary School**

#### **Laurel, Maryland**

In partnership with the Coca Cola Company, Laurel Woods Elementary School established a mentoring program for fourth grade students. The school's Action Team for Partnerships dedicated a lot of effort implementing this program successfully. They learned some valuable lessons along the way.

Starting the program required many actions from several people. First, the Action Team worked with the state-mentoring agency in Maryland. Then, a Coca Cola employee recruited mentors. The Action Team got teachers and the Student Support Team involved. The team also trained the mentors and worked through a multitude of other details and meetings. Finally, they were ready to focus on involving the families of the selected students.

Initially, the Action Team believed that students could not be informed of their selection to participate until their parent or guardian returned a written permission slip. They mailed the slips to the students' homes, but almost none were returned. This caused a problem because the big "kick off" event was fast approaching when the mentors would be introduced to the mentees and their families, and there were no official mentees. Laurel Woods has a high transience rate and many of its families live in fluctuating economic and domestic circumstances. People moved, and did not pick up mail, changed living arrangements, to name a few of the reasons for the low return. The Action Team realized that mailing the permission slips home was not the best approach to reach out to students' families.

Members of the Action Team solved this dilemma by returning to the methods that had worked well in other situations. They tracked down current phone numbers and received verbal permission to have the students participate, even though this deviated from the state mentor office's recommended method. Action Team members answered families' initial questions, and received an overwhelmingly positive response to the program. Based on verbal permission, the Action Team launched the student recruitment effort. Many student and teacher phone calls and written reminders sent home with students resulted in all sixteen selected students returning

written permission slips. Lesson learned: the Action Team should have used already proven ways of getting families involved.

The mentoring program required not only parent/guardian permission, but also their attendance at the kick-off event and their ongoing support of the program. The sixteen recruited students astonished everyone with their enthusiasm to participate. The students knew that participation in the kick-off event was important, and that they could not attend without an adult family member. One parent on her way into the event with her daughter said grudgingly to an Action Team member, “She literally begged me to bring her to this; I never leave my house in the evenings after work for anything.” At the end of the evening, the mother made a point of seeking out the Action Team member to express how happy she was that her daughter could participate and what a great idea the mentoring program was. Second lesson learned: the fact that this mother included herself as a participant illustrates how worthwhile it can be to recruit and involve the families who may be hardest to reach.

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