



- [Home](#)
- [Photo Galleries](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Mobile](#)
- [RSS](#)
- [Open House Submission](#)
- [About Us](#)

Search



Content

- [Agenda](#)
- [Arts & Entertainment](#)
- [Business Directory](#)
- [Calendar of Events](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Dollars & Sense](#)
- [Going Green!](#)
- [Legals](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Our Community](#)
 - [Bethany Beach](#)
 - [Dagsboro](#)
 - [Fenwick Island](#)
 - [Frankford](#)
 - [Indian River School District](#)
 - [Millville](#)
 - [Ocean View](#)
 - [Selbyville](#)
 - [South Bethany](#)
 - [Sussex County](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Sports](#)
 - [Homeplate 2009](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [To Your Health](#)
- [ViewPoint](#)

PointMail

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Navigation

- [Publications](#)
- [Recent posts](#)

User login

Username: *

Password: *

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Mentor program gives students extra support

[Front Page](#) [Indian River School District](#) [Local News](#)

By Ryan Saxton
Staff Reporter

Volunteers and teachers are changing the way young children develop in local schools today. Throughout the Indian River School District, school mentors are offering their time and interest to be there for young students as they learn.

The district's administrator of community programs, Ivan Neal, has helped oversee the mentor programs throughout area schools. At Phillip C. Showell Elementary School, mentor coordinator Cheryl Carey organizes the program for nearly 70 kids and 44 mentors.

"When we saw a change in the administration," Carey recalled, "I knew it was a great opportunity to bring along this program. Being there for the children has always been a passion of mine."

Throughout the week, mentors give up a half-hour or hour of their time to be with students. Some mentors spend time with two or three students, too. The mentors help with school work, play games with the students, create crafts with them and perform a wide variety of other activities with their mentees.

According to studies done by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Delaware and Creative Mentoring, students involved in mentoring programs display the following results: 81 percent exhibit improved self-confidence, self-esteem and self control; 61 percent show an improved attitude toward learning; 46 percent are less likely to start using illegal drugs; 52 percent are less likely to skip school; and 27 percent less likely to start drinking.

"Everything falls into place with the mentoring programs," said Carey. "There are some great people in the community I've met through the program, and they are absolutely wonderful."

Since becoming the school resource officer for Selbyville area schools, Selbyville Police Department Lt. Robert L. Reed has helped oversee the schools' mentor programs and has even given the children his own time as a mentor.

"This program gives children another adult to talk to," said Reed. "Some of these students don't have very many adult figures in their life – someone to sit down and listen to them or talk to them when they need it."

"This program changes children's lives," emphasized Carey. "Even those who come in and meet with two or three students each week are one-on-one with these kids. Our program is child-centered, while others are entirely based on academics. We can work on academics, too, but we really focus on the needs of the kids here. These programs are all about putting one more person in their lives to listen and care for them."

The mentor program at Showell has since expanded with a supplement program, to allow high school students to spend time with the younger kids, as well.

"We have 45 high-school students that come down once a week for an hour and 15 minutes, to work one-on-one with students, too," Carey added. "It's a separate program from our mentoring, but it helps these students become great role models. It serves as the building block for those students to give back later.

"The high-school students getting involved are at the top of the class," she noted. "We have kids find that teaching is their passion. This is just as much for the high-schoolers as it is for the mentee."

Becki Mott-Lynn, guidance counselor at Southern Delaware School of the Arts (SDSA), helps run the school's mentor program there. At Selbyville Middle School, Katrania Anthony inherited the program when she came to the school three years ago.

"Our mentors really help these kids, socially and academically," Anthony said, "which is also part of our school goals. It helps them to personally see people from different careers and businesses, building on what our school mission is. These programs are proven to help them academically and in their social lives later on. Hopefully, programs like this will help them give back to the community."

The Selbyville Middle School program has 26 mentors for 39 students, and some of the mentors follow the students up from elementary school.

"We're fortunate to have a lot of teachers participate as mentors here," Anthony added, "and we're really blessed to have the support we do from the community. For our kids here, having adults listen and spend time with them has really encouraged them. We even have some mentors who have followed the students up to high school.

"We would like them to stick with it, and really meets their students' needs at that level," she said. "It's really important to have that connection. It makes [the students] feel valued when that person comes to the school to spend time with them."

Anthony is currently working on incorporating various cultures into the mentor program at Selbyville Middle School, to help the children feel comfortable and prepare them for life.