

The Importance of Mentoring Young People
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Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Tonight, it gives me great pleasure to speak to you about a subject near and dear to my heart. We are all too familiar with the achievement gap. Many of us are also aware of how many schools try to remedy the problem with after school tutoring, smaller class sizes, and other interventions. However, there is one intervention that is probably more relevant and hands-on and that intervention is mentoring.

According to the Huffington Post, 52% of American children will receive some type of government assistance. That is up from 36% a few years ago. This is an astonishing statistic. However, according to the Heritage Foundation, there are 2 main reasons that American children are poor. Those two reasons are the parents do not work much and fathers are absent from the home. If the citizens of this country want to change this growing problem of poverty in America, then we need to teach children some different values. The reality is that children in poverty will not learn work ethic and success if the community does not get involved. Children in poverty have a difficult time breaking the vicious cycle of poverty. The communities they live in are plagued with drugs, gun violence, male incarceration, and absentee fatherhood. Since their life outcomes seem so bleak, it is unfair to imagine these children fixing their own problems. If the community does not step in to help out, then in another five years the 52% of American children receiving government assistance will grow to 65% and so on. America cannot afford that.

Today, my topic is the importance of mentoring programs to help aid children in breaking the cycle of poverty. Mentoring programs can be hugely successful in decreasing the achievement gap. Mentoring is so important that it has gained the attention of the President and First Lady. They have declared January National Mentoring Month. I quote from her speech:

The biggest lesson our girls have learned and the one I hope you all learn as you embark on this program is that each of us has the ability to move beyond the circumstances that we were born into. That's really the story of both me and the President, that through hard work and perseverance, that you can actually choose the life that you want to live -- it's your choice.

The only thing that we ask in return ...is that when this is all over, that you give back, that you do the same for someone else. That's the only thing we ask of you. Because the beauty of being a mentor is that anyone can do it at any age.

So that means if there's a sibling in your life, a friend, a cousin, another person down the road, you can thank your own mentor for turning around and helping pull someone else up. You can do that by doing the same.

Think about that right now. Not just today but in every aspect of your life, that's a commitment that both the President and I have made, that no matter how far we climb we're always looking back to figure out who we can pull up along the way. And it's never too soon for each of you.

Recently, (before National Mentoring Month) I started a mentoring program. I felt as a teacher I was doing everything that I knew how to do in the classroom. After having so many conversations with my students about the difficulty of their lives, I thought I could better serve the students by offering them some outside of school services. Never in my life have I undertaken something so difficult and yet at the same time rewarding. Mentoring is important because it allows young people the opportunity to step outside of their current conditions and hope for a better life. Mentoring gives them the tools to do better, to want more, and the ability to make those changes happen.

It is easy to tell children in a classroom that they can be anything that they want to be, but it is quite another thing to show them. In the past, we have asked the very young people who need us the most to figure it out for themselves. Many children living in poverty do not have the abilities to figure it out for themselves. For example, they do not have access to role models to show them how to be doctors. For many of these young people the closest they ever get to a doctor is the emergency room. They do not have role models to show them how to be lawyers, business people, or even steady workers. The research from the Heritage Foundation demonstrates that many of these children's parents only work an average of 16 hours per week. Due to the parents' lack of skills and education, the parents are unable to obtain and maintain jobs with adequate pay and benefits. Children living in poverty do not have the opportunities that we have had. Many of these children do not even get to travel outside of their home state and barely outside of their home cities.

Every day, I get to witness the affects of mentoring. I once worked in a restaurant where the operating partner took an interest in a young man who had come from an impoverished background. All he did was say, if you get your life together, I will help you get into college, train you, and make you apart of my management team. I watched another man take a young man under his wing, and tell him he would pay for his college education. Once that young man finished school, the mentor promised the young male that he could work for him. These two young men were able to escape the cycle of poverty because someone in the community proved they cared. If each one would reach one, then imagine how many more young men and women could be lifted out of poverty. How many more young people could be successful? Just last week a coach

bought one of his players a shirt and tie to wear to an awards banquet because the young man did not own a shirt with a collar.

Over the holidays we all had the opportunity to witness the best form of schools and communities working together ever. If you want to talk about high quality partnerships there is no better example than that presented in "Blind Side." For those of you who are pop culture illiterate such as myself or have not had the opportunity to see the movie, I will update you. "Blind Side" is a movie about a young male who lived in poverty who makes it to the NFL. This young man was taken to a private school by a local member of his community. The man "Tony" wanted his son to be enrolled into the school, and the neighbor's kid came along for the ride. The school decided to admit the two boys. Michael, the neighbor, winds up homeless due to his mother's drug addiction. He is finally adapted by the Toulles. He lives happily ever after, but what the movie did not show was that many people in the school had let Michael stay over and had fed him (this according to his interviews). The movie also did not emphasize enough how the teachers and the entire school rallied around him.

Michael was on the way to becoming another statistic. However, fate intervened, and he crossed paths with Mrs. Toule one day. His life was never the same. Michael had a lot to overcome like many students in our community, but with the help of tutors, his adapted family, and the school Michael succeeded. Michael Ohre now plays in the NFL for the Baltimore Ravens who lost to my Colts two Saturdays ago. He is young and has time to win a Super Bowl.

At a teacher's professional development seminar a couple of weeks ago, I was privy to hear the story of Dr. Adolph Brown, III, who received his doctorate at 26. He, too, grew up in poverty. He talked about how he went 3 months with no running water in his home. He credited his teachers for pushing him down the right road. He even told the story of how once when they were going on a field trip a teacher called him to her desk, gave him \$2 quietly, and asked him to have a seat. Then she called all the children up to pay for the field trip. She gave him dignity that day.

All of these examples demonstrate the power of community partnerships and mentoring.

In the report by the Heritage Foundation, they found that people in poverty only work about half as much as many of us. If children could be shown how to get and maintain a full-time job, then 75% of people would be lifted out of poverty. 66% of children in poverty are living in single parent homes. If we were able to mentor young girls and demonstrate the importance of family planning, then fewer children would be born to single family homes. If we could teach young men and women the importance of getting married before having children, then this would lessen the number of children growing up in poverty.

Since starting my mentoring program, young men have told me that they were not going to join a gang, that they wanted to do job shadowing, and that they were having fun. Every day in school I hear when is the next meeting. These young men enjoyed seeing and hearing from other successful men. They started realizing that they could be successful as well. Their grades have improved. What is even better than that is that the male mentors have had equally as much fun because they felt they were making a difference in their communities.

Since working with the young women, I can see more confidence in their abilities. Some liked being able to discuss their problems in a forum with other women who have been through what they have gone through and have still managed to be successful. They have enjoyed the sisterhood and camaraderie. The speakers have come to me and have talked about how powerful the meetings were.

What if we could have community partnerships with every impoverished community in America? What if every business developed the Al Thompson concept of when the community is in need, I will be there indeed. Al Thompson is the owner of the local Chick Fil A. He feeds students in my mentoring program on seminar days. What if every impoverished child could have a mentor, an internship, a job shadowing experience, or a field trip to a college or technical school to learn about a career? What if children in impoverished communities could muster up enough hope to dream about career opportunities rather than unstable job opportunities? And, what if every one of these children paid it forward and became mentors themselves? Could we dare dream of an America without an inadequate welfare system? Could we dream of an America where every child felt a sense of responsibility rather than a sense of entitlement?

Mohandas Gandhi said be the change that you are looking for. In order for America to continue to be a world leader, then we will need to invest more time, more money, more opportunity, and more of ourselves into the education of our young people. Aristotle said that the fate of empires rests in the education of its young people. Our very future depends on how well the populace is educated. If you want to change the world, mentor a child.