

Posted on Wed, Dec. 08, 2004

Greater safety with mentors

They help change youths' attitudes.

By Marlene L. Olshan

The recent death of Jalil Speaks near Strawberry Mansion High School marked the 27th young life lost through violence in Philadelphia this year. Our newspapers are filled with stories of youths' being bullied, beaten up and hassled, and of children who need "safe zones" just to make it safely to school everyday. Even after they enter school buildings, so many of our young people still aren't safe.

Almost 26 percent of all ninth graders in Philadelphia drop out before graduating from high school, according to a 2002 study, and, without intervention, this unacceptably high rate is likely to increase. If we want children to attend class, to study, and to graduate, then our schools must be safe, welcoming places.

While it is understandable that the School District of Philadelphia has called for more police on school grounds, this clearly is not a viable long-term solution to the complex problem of youth violence. The economics of this strategy are daunting. During a time when both the district and the city face financial challenges, there is not a readily available source of funding to pay for police officers at schools.

Even more important, we all know that posting police in our schools does not, and never will, create the kind of environment we want for our young people.

A better solution - one that will make neighborhoods as well as schools safer - is to change the attitudes and behaviors that lead to violence. That's why one-to-one mentoring needs to be given serious consideration as part of a multipronged strategy for addressing youth violence.

By providing mentors for children and youths before they become enmeshed in a culture of violence, we can help them see that conflict does not have to be resolved with brute force. Let's provide young people with adult friends and role models to help them cope with life's challenges. Let's give them a chance to see the world through someone else's eyes. Let's give them some additional adult support and guidance. Let's do what we can to prevent senseless violence before it occurs.

School-based mentoring is a particularly relevant method of intervention. In school-based mentoring, students from local elementary and middle schools are matched with mentors who live or work in the neighborhood. Usually, these volunteers go to the school during

lunch hour, but many times the visits can take place after school - in the library, computer room or gym.

During these meetings, the pair may eat lunch, play games, work on that tough math problem, or just talk.

By spending time together and hanging out, the mentor and young person build a relationship and a friendship. And we know that these friendships can indeed transform lives.

Independent research confirms that a relationship with a mentor can have a positive impact on young people. Studies have shown, for instance, that children and youths who have Big Brothers and Big Sisters are more likely to attend school and get better grades. They have better relationships with teachers, families and peers. They are less likely to begin using drugs and alcohol - and they are less likely to get involved in violence.

Today, many elementary and middle schools throughout Philadelphia are partnering with various community organizations to bring mentors into their classrooms. However, given the recent outbreak of violence, we must do more to reach more children - now.

It costs about \$1,000 to create and support one school-based mentoring match a year. By comparison, the cost of treating someone for a gunshot wound in a hospital could be \$20,000 or more, and it costs about \$24,000 a year to incarcerate an adult in the United States. Look at these numbers, and you'll see why so many agencies - including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - consider mentoring a cost-effective investment in the future of our youth.

The Philadelphia School District and the City of Philadelphia are clearly committed to making the city's public schools safer for all students. However, they can't do it alone. Let's do what we can as a community to put more mentors into schools so we can strengthen our schools and our neighborhoods.

Marlene L. Olshan is chief executive officer of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern Pennsylvania