

impact

of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences



Economic Development and Quality of Life for People and Communities

Project SOAR: Mentoring At-Risk Youth and Families

Issue

Youth who fall behind in school are often the ones who drop out, abuse drugs, get involved in criminal activity, and are teen parents. Children are at risk when two or more risk factors interact; these include poverty, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, truancy, illiteracy, and others. Limited resource families are especially vulnerable. In Arizona, Hispanics have one of the highest drop-out rates. Enhancement of early schooling and the prevention of school failure can significantly impact the drop-out rate and future success and vitality of families and communities. Researchers agree that enhancing academic success and preventing school failure leads to decreasing at-risk behaviors and contributes to strengthening youth, families, and communities. Mentoring programs have proven successful in improving school attendance, school performance, increasing protective factors and decreasing risk factors such as substance abuse, truancy, and juvenile delinquency.

What has been done?

Project SOAR is an extensive mentoring program targeting at-risk youth and families. It includes the Children, Youth and Families At Risk (CYFAR) Project, the City of Chandler/

United Way Project and the JUMP Program. Project SOAR recruits university and community college students to work with students at risk of academic failure and with their families to promote personal and academic success. Mentors, mentees and parents work together in a comprehensive program that includes mentor training, academic support, skill building, leadership development, parent education, and social and personal interaction. Project SOAR is a collaborative effort among local public schools, universities, community colleges, the Office of Juvenile Justice, the City of Chandler, and Cooperative Extension. In 2002, a total of 147 participants were served by Project SOAR. The program provided 3,337 hours of mentoring, 23 parent education series, 14 mentor training sessions, and 19 educational field trips. Forty-five youth and mentors volunteered monthly in a Reading Buddies program for Head Start. A total of 96 volunteers contributed 1,759 hours of service to the community. Project SOAR targets ethnically diverse families, with primary focus on Hispanic, African American, and Native American students. The program was conducted at three elementary schools in the Phoenix/Chandler areas.

Impact

More than 80 percent of the students who participated in the mentoring program through SOAR's CYFAR Project said they would like a mentor again next year. Outcome evaluations showed that these students improved in an average of three subject areas and improved their ratings in study skills and citizenship. Student survey results showed that they attributed the positive changes in attitudes to the program. In the City of Chandler/United Way Project, 70 percent of the mentees reported that their mentor gave them special attention in helping them with school work and being a friend. These mentees said SOAR helped improve their grades. In the JUMP Program, 66 percent of the participants improved their reading and math grades. Four out of five participants improved or maintained study skills. Overall, students in all three SOAR programs increased their knowledge and skills in leadership and generally improved their academic performance, and parents increased their involvement with their children.

Funding

USDA, CSREES
Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention
City of Chandler
Valley of the Sun United Way
National 4-H Council

Contact

Juanita O'Campo Waits
Maricopa Cooperative Extension
The University of Arizona
4341 E. Broadway
Phoenix, AZ 85040-8807
Tel: (602) 470-8086 ext 331, FAX (602) 470-8082
jwaits@ag.arizona.edu