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Premium Content

ViewPoint: It's time to bring mentorship to public schools

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What do Steve Jobs, Larry Page, and Michael Bloomberg have in common? Each of those business leaders has benefited from mentorship firsthand. In fact, many of the most successful entrepreneurs and business leaders credit successful careers to mentorship.

This makes a lot of sense. Successful companies large and small use mentoring to navigate challenges such as increasing employee retention, enabling company succession plans and improving productivity. In fact, 71 percent of Fortune 500 companies offer professional mentoring programs to staff.

Corporate mentorship has trickled down into higher education, where companies seek mentees in undergraduate classrooms, offering valuable exposure and experience to students. In turn, these companies are smartly cultivating a pipeline of qualified employees ready to join the workforce.

Despite these efforts, the National Federation of Independent Businesses reports that employers still struggle to find candidates with the right soft skills for 59 percent of open positions. Perhaps the business community needs to reach farther and begin cultivating a workforce pipeline, with mentorship, long before college.

Boston's future workforce is currently sitting in classrooms across the city. Students are dealing with unique challenges — learning English, adapting to a new environment, concerns over stress at home and safety in their neighborhoods — that make it hard to learn and even harder to get ahead. City data indicates that the Boston Public Schools four-year graduation rate is 70.7 percent. That represents progress, but not nearly enough.

Like corporate mentoring, mentoring in our public schools is tremendously effective, especially for students considered at-risk or falling behind. According to the National Mentoring Project, students who face an opportunity gap but have a mentor are 55 percent more likely to enroll in college than those who did not. Further, youth matched with a mentor were 130 percent more likely to become future leaders.



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Pamela Civins is the executive director of Boston Partners in Education.

Beyond supporting academic success, adult mentors serve as role models and offer perspective of a different future. For a young person who doesn't know many people, if any, who have attended college, this exposure is profound.

At Boston Partners in Education, we feel mentors are most effective in the classroom and work to match volunteers with K-12 students for weekly academic mentoring sessions. Our mentors don't replace teachers, they help students learn on their own terms and assist teachers by offering extra adult support. The key to being a successful mentor is maintaining a consistent presence and being able to communicate and listen.

Boston's business leaders are in a unique position to shape the career trajectory of BPS students through mentorship — whether volunteering directly or by encouraging and enabling employees to volunteer. Creating a sustainable talent pipeline calls for Boston's business leaders to get involved on a grassroots level.

We applaud our long-term corporate partners like State Street, Ropes & Gray, Salesforce.com and many more who are already involved in the classrooms through our programs. But we need buy-in from today's business leaders to prepare a stronger and smarter workforce for the future.

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