

Kim Stefansson
Escambia County School District
Public Relations Coordinator
kstefansson@escambia.k12.fl.us
850 469-6219 (Office)
850-393-0539 (Cell)

ECSD NEWS RELEASE

Jan. 27, 2017

Motivator Mentors' Milestone Celebration *ECSD Mentors Exceed 1,000 Volunteers*

Pensacola, FL: Room 160 at the J.E. Hall Center was packed this morning for the annual Mentor Appreciation Breakfast. The gathering is held in January to mark Mentor Awareness Month and, with community support, mentors gather for breakfast and to hear stories and share some laughter and even a few tears.

Everyone agrees that having a mentor is great for the students involved. That is why many employers, including the school district, will allow staff members to have time, on the clock, to meet with a child. Gatherings like this one, help remind mentors and the schools' mentor coordinators of just how wonderful the experience can be for the mentors involved. This is also why more high school programs are establishing mentor partnerships with elementary schools, so their participating teens can serve as a mentor for a younger student.

Melanie Cook, Pensacola High School sophomore in the International Baccalaureate Program and the Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFJROTC), is a second year mentor at C.A. Weis Community School for a little girl half her height. She wasn't so sure if mentoring was for her. "When I started mentoring my first thought was, Oh Gosh! This is going to be terrible. I am the worst with children! Then I got there and realized that those thoughts might have been right, because she did not talk for almost a month," Cook said to the amusement of the other mentors in the room. "But over the two years she has opened up and now she will talk. It's nice knowing that if someone will open up to someone who is twice their height, that if this kid can look up to me, then I can look up to others in the same way."

At Booker T. Washington High School a group of basketball players were trained as mentors and they walk out the back gate of their school's campus to go next door to Holm Elementary School to meet with kids once a week. The staff members who started this were the Mentor Coordinators at Holm Elementary, Robin Lechien, and Tara Rush from Washington High. Rush brought many of these new mentors to the breakfast. "When we started we were meeting at 7:30 (a.m.). The boys liked it so much, they asked if we could start going over 30 minutes earlier so they could have more time with their littles," Rush explained.

Jessica Beasley spoke at last year's breakfast – as a third year mentor. This year she took the podium as fourth year mentor AND a first year teacher at Global Learning Academy. "Until I

became a classroom teacher I didn't understand the strong impact a mentor could have. The kids genuinely value the time that they get to spend with you. The one-on-one time that every classroom teacher wishes they could spend with each student is the gap that you help bridge."

"You provide support that is invaluable to us as teachers. Going the extra mile that we wish we could, you have the power to turn around a bad mood, intervene in the middle of a bad day, and permanently change a bad perspective," Beasley added. "Your positive attitude and your time makes more than just a difference, it can make an entire life. You fill the void by being the ears, and the shoulders that we can't. So, on behalf of every teacher that could not be here to tell you thank you, we really do appreciate you. And as a new teacher, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Sally Bergosh, ECSD's Youth Motivator Mentor Program Project Director, advised everyone that you might wonder if an hour a week can in fact make a difference. "Sometimes our kids don't know how to show that you how they feel and you may wonder, 'Am I really doing anything?' Stay the course. Every time you come back you may be showing that student for the first time ever what a consistent role model looks like. Sometimes it is that simple accountability that helps them come to school every day."

Mark Yelverton, O.J. Semmes Elementary School's Mentor Coordinator shared a story that mentors had shared with him. In one, the mentor had gone outside and played with a football with his student.

"I am sitting in my office and he comes in and his eyes are red and he's getting emotional. I'm looking at him and I'm think, No, don't cry! I could tell something had happened, so I asked and he said (sounding choked up) 'I threw the football with him.' I thought, what? Did you hit him in the eye, or something? The mentor said, 'no one had ever thrown a football with him before.' Now I'm standing there thinking, I'm not gonna cry! I had to do some jumping jacks instead."

"It's powerful when you realize that was a first," he added.

To continue his story, "Fifteen-twenty minutes later one of our female mentors walks in and her eyes are red, I think, this is just not my day! So, I ask her, is everything okay and she says (sounding choked up again), No. I asked what happened and she told me, 'no one had ever painted her finger nails so I painted her fingernails,' and she started crying and I started crying. Jumping jacks were not going to work this time.'

"Thank you for the firsts you provide like throwing a football or painting the fingernails. Thank you very much," he ended.

The ECSD Youth Motivator Mentor Program has been in place for 23 years. This year the breakfast was also an opportunity to acknowledge the program surpassing 1,000 volunteers! That number is actually low as it doesn't include all of the high school students whose clubs or classes mentor younger children. Also, some mentors are able to work with more than one child.

Bergosh is proud of the program's growth but hopes even more people will see the value of this experience and sign up as there are always more students who need and deserve a one-on-one mentor experience.

The Youth Motivator Mentor program is run out of the ECSD Community Involvement Office and requires a one-hour introductory class and a background check and fingerprinting that is paid for by the school district. Mentoring is one hour a week and happens in school. Each school involved has a Mentor Coordinator who helps pair mentors with a student. The students are usually recommended by their teacher or guidance counselor. Parents can ask to have their child added to a waiting list and are asked to sign a permission form before meetings with a mentor begin. Mentors often stay with the same student for multiple years and may even follow their student as they fleet up from elementary school to middle and high school. Interested parties can call 850-469-5676 for more information.

PHOTO INFO:

IMG_9760 -- Pensacola High's Melanie Cook indicates just how tall her assigned student was when they met.

IMG_9839 -- Mark Yelverton, Mentor Coordinator from O.J. Semmes Elementary shared a story about a day when two mentors experienced a FIRST with their student on the same day, and how hard it can be to not cry with a mentor some days when their student touches their hearts.

IMG_9878 -- From the Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFJROTC) unit at Pensacola High School, Melanie Cook, Colonel Lehman and Carlos Mims, Cadet Colonel and Group Commander. Mims attended C.A. Weis Elementary and had a mentor and is proud to be able to return there to BE a mentor and lead other students from their unit.

IMG_9908 -- Members of the basketball team at Booker T. Washington High School attended the Mentor Appreciation Breakfast with their Mentor Coordinator Tara Rush. The boys travel once a week their neighboring elementary school, to serve as role models for Holm Elementary students. They enjoy this so much they have doubled the amount of time they spend with the Littles.

IMG_9928 --Fourth year mentor and first year teacher, Jessica Beasley from Global Learning Academy, visited with 18-year mentor, and School Board member, Patty Hightower after the breakfast. Beasley shared that "your positive attitude and time makes more than just a difference, it can make an entire life."

Media queries about Escambia County School District topics should be directed to Kim Stefansson, at 850-393-0539 (cell) or kstefansson@escambia.k12.fl.us. Like ECSD on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ecsdfl

Go to the Escambia Schools Public Relations page on www.facebook.com/ecsd.public to see pictures of recent events.

Visit ECSD's web page at www.escambiaschools.org

ECSD prc ### /2017