

Orchestrating a School Counseling and Community Collaboration: From Boys to Men



An Exploratory Case Study

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I. PROJECT SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Major Findings Displayed by Research Question

1. How does the collaboration function?

The BTM organization provides the school with increased resources that aid in improving boys overall success in and out of school.

2. What is the impact of the collaboration on participants?

BTM enhances boys' academic success. This is displayed in improved grades, increased attendance, and enhanced school engagement.

BTM positively influences boys' behavior. There were less high-level infractions at school, boys were happier, had a more positive outlook on life, improved self-esteem, and engaged in less risk-taking behavior.

BTM influences changes in boys' relationships. Boys are able to build friendships, trust adults, and communicate more effectively.

3. To what extent are the goals of both organizations realized?

Both the school and BTM benefits from maintaining the collaboration.

Recommendations

- Improve communication between BTM and Teachers, BTM and Parents.
- Identify BTM participant data sources that could be tracked longitudinally.
- More closely monitor BTM participant entry and exit of the program (wide range of participation levels). For example, 70% having of the boys in the study participated in BTM for more than 6 months, and 30% participated from 1-6 months. Also, there were differences in entry levels in terms of academic and behavioral success. Some boys were high achievers with very few referrals, and other boys had very low grades and multiple behavioral referrals.
- Enhance BTM participant differentiation.
- Better articulate program logic model (inputs, outputs, activities and outcomes).

II. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Purpose of Project

The Boys To Men (BTM) Mentoring Network is a nonprofit organization serving at-risk adolescent boys in the San Diego community. For the last 16 years BTM has worked to recruit, train and organize mentors who have the skills to encourage responsibility and personal growth in the boys with whom they work.

BTM is unique in that it focuses much more on group activities and relationship building than traditional mentoring programs (programs largely tasked with pairing mentors with mentees). In this way, one adult can impact many lives through his lived experience and positive influence on the group.

Over the past 5 years, BTM has established collaborative relationships with several middle and high schools. The main structure of these collaborations consists of running weekly mentoring groups. Boys from the schools meet afterschool in a classroom or other designated area. The boys and men complete several group enrichment or fellowship activities and then form a circle. Within this circle, both the mentors and mentees speak honestly about emotions, struggles, growing-up or growing older. In many ways, BTM creates a safe place to share and feel supported. In one particular middle school (the school described within this study), the partnership has grown over several years to include farther-ranging services at the school site. For example, the school counselor and school leadership orchestrate a referral process for more intensive BTM groups during the school day. Finally, BTM has also invested in creating several off-campus incentive activities for the boys that include, flag football, surf excursions and camping at the BTM retreat in the nearby mountains.

Investigating the collaboration between BTM and their most-established middle school site is important because very few cases of community and school counseling collaborations have been studied, and no cases have explicitly investigated a nonprofit and school counseling collaboration that share resources and outcomes. Investigating and evaluating this partnership may help to provide crucial new knowledge about the collective benefits associated with pooling resources and sharing responsibilities during times of strapped educational funding.

Significance and Rationale

California schools were hit hard by the recent recession. Layoffs or increased counselor to student ratios adversely affected school counselors. According to the American School Counseling Association, California school counselors maintain an average student to counselor ratio of 1,016 to 1 (ASCA, 2011). Therefore, it is easy to assume that students may not get the individual attention that they need regardless of any innovative programs and/or structural interventions a school counselor may supply. Given these conditions, when a program like BTM seeks to expand their services to schools, the potential for addressing the developmental, social and emotional needs of boys is greatly enhanced. This is important because boys are particularly at risk of

missing school, low school achievement, being held back a grade level, acting out behaviorally, dropping out of school; and adversely affected by issues related to poverty, violence, low achievement, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy (Slavin & Madden, 2004; Wells, 1990; Frymier & Gansneder, 1989).

Generally, children are considered at-risk when both internal and external risk factors are present within their lives. For example, a case study (Freedman, 1993) found negative attitudes and perceptions about school, teachers and achievement were associated with at-risk youth. The study also identified students who were failing one or more subjects, considered school to be a place of dread, and disliked attending as major factors contributing to the at-risk categorization. Similarly, Jackson (2005) found that alienation from school administrators, classmates, and teachers were common characteristics of at-risk youth and indicated that at-risk adolescents had greater feelings of marginalization, powerlessness, and overall negative attitudes. Cavazos (1999) found that at-risk children characteristically had not received the support needed to be successful in school. Wells (1990) identified a variety of circumstances that often place students at risk. She listed student-related, family-related, school-related, and community-related factors. While any one factor—or even several factors—does not necessarily place students at risk, combinations of circumstances identify the potential of academic failure or dropping out (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989). Some of the factors identified by Wells are listed in table 1.

Table 1: Circumstances that may place students at-risk

School Related:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict between home/school culture • Ineffective discipline system • Lack of adequate counseling • Negative school climate • Lack of relevant curriculum • Passive instructional strategies • Inappropriate use of technology • Disregard of student learning styles • Retentions/Suspensions • Low expectations • Lack of language instruction
Student Related:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor school attitude • Low ability level • Attendance/truancy • Behavior/discipline problems • Pregnancy • Drug abuse • Poor peer relationships • Nonparticipation • Friends have dropped out • Illness/disability • Low self-esteem/self-efficacy
Community Related:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of community support services or response • Lack of community support for schools • High incidences of criminal activities • Lack of school/community linkages

Family Related:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low SES • Dysfunctional home life • No parental involvement • Low parental expectations • Non-English-speaking home • Ineffective parenting/abuse • High mobility
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Source: Wells, S.E. (1990). *At-risk youth: Identification, programs, and recommendations*. Englewood, CO: Teacher Idea Press.

Because at-risk youth are more likely to experience failure in school or drop out, schools continue to look for effective interventions for school-related problems affecting at-risk youth. Proponents of mentoring programs hypothesize that mentoring programs could be part of the answer to these problems; however, little research has been conducted evaluating the effectiveness of mentoring programs collaborating with school counselors.

The BTM/middle school collaboration offered a great opportunity to investigate the relationship between mentoring and school counseling. Furthermore, this study presented the prospect of better understanding how reciprocal partnerships are established and encouraged within economically disadvantaged schools.

Within school counseling, a fairly robust literature exists to help guide effective community and school collaborations (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Bryon & Holcolm-McCoy, 2007; Griffin & Ferris, 2010; Keys, Bemak, Carpenter & King-Sears, 1998; Porter, Epp & Bryant, 2000; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000; 2002). What is missing from this literature are actual case studies or other empirical work that may shed light on how these partnerships work, their impact on students, or how they meet the differing needs of multiple organizations. These gaps in the literature helped to formulate the following methodology and research questions.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

Due to the lack of empirical studies in this area, and the need to collect data across a range of populations and settings, an exploratory case study design was selected as the most relevant research methodology. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) state, "In essence, we see the primary defining features of a case study as being a multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context" (p.52). Accessing multiple perspectives within the case and using a wide variety of methods to collect and analyze data helped to reveal the extent to which the partnership's goals were realized and surfaced important insights into this collaborative work.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this research study were:

1. How does the collaboration function?
2. What is the impact of the collaboration on participants?
3. To what extent are the goals of both organizations realized?

Participants

The participants of this study included individuals from both within and outside the Boys to Men (BTM) organization. From within BTM, three administrators (including a program founder), five volunteer mentors, eleven parents, and twenty-23 boys (ranging in age from 12-15) participated in the study. Students reported the following ethnic breakdown: 39% African American, 4% Asian, 26% Hispanic, 4% Native American, 13% White, and 8% Other. Finally, participants from the partner middle school included the principal, the counselor, and three teachers. Table 2 summarizes total numbers of all types of participants.

Table 2: Overall Summary of Number of Participants

Participant Type	Interview	Survey
Student	22	23
Parent	0	11
Mentor/Program Representative	8	0
Teacher	3	0
School Counselor	1	0
Principal	1	0
Total	35	34

Typical Program Participant

Age: 14

Grade: 8th GPA: 2.7

Unexcused absences: 3

Discipline Referrals: 7

Brief bio:

Lives with mom and grandma. Father is a drug addict. Mother doesn't have a job. Beginning to think school is - important and that if he does well, he can have a better life. He is focusing on improving his behavior.

Data Collection and Analysis

Given the wide scope of the data collected and analyzed, the research team used several strategies to identify overarching themes and answer the research questions. The research team was made up of two counselor educators with former school counseling experience, one graduate student team leader, and four other graduate level research assistants. Table 3 illustrates the techniques employed to collect and analyze data within the case.

Table 3: Data Sources, Data Collected, and Data Analysis Techniques

Data Source	Data Collected	Data Analysis Techniques
Students	Paper Surveys	Statistical Analysis and Coding
Students	Achievement Data	Statistical Analysis
Students	Interviews	Transcription and Coding
Parents	Online Surveys	Statistical Analysis and Coding
BTM Staff/Mentors	Interviews	Transcription and Coding
SVMS Admin/Counselor	Interviews	Transcription and Coding
SVMS Teachers	Interviews	Transcription and Coding

Data were analyzed across the project by implementing inductive category coding and simultaneous comparisons to establish meaningful groups (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The research team was invested in building trustworthy results throughout the study. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) established protocols for enhancing trustworthiness within naturalistic or qualitative research guided the selection the above methods to support data triangulation (comparing data across sources); encouraged the team to implement peer debriefing; and member-checking the findings with key research participants (both BTM and school participants).

IV. DETAILED FINDINGS

Q:

#1 How does the collaboration function?

A:

The BTM organization provides the school with increased resources that aid BTM participants in improving their overall success in and out of school.

"The first couple of years we really had to do battle and make some really clear steps towards making sure that everything was on the up and up. Our board was very very cautious, our superintendent was extremely cautious. We made sure that all of these gentlemen [mentors] were fingerprinted and checked by us, and fingerprinted and checked by their organization as well. I mean, there were double checks everywhere. It really did take that." Principal

"[In reference to BTM] Super positive and super powerful. Something that's been looked on really, really highly by the principal and we've been able to use it as a supplement to counseling because the counseling department has been hit so hard and it's just something that I view as really positive and just a really amazing resource that not every school has." Teacher

"We've partnered with other schools and other organizations and unless we have that vital person within the school that is really advocating and gets what we do and wants it for their kids, we will be unsuccessful." BTM Staff Member

"I welcome... teachers in there that are participating with us, and actually I would like to see that happen more with the teachers... I think that that would go a long way to improve their rapport with their students." BTM Mentor

By the numbers...

➤ 100% of parents strongly agree BTM is a good thing for their son

Q:

#2

What is the impact of the collaboration on participants?

A:

Improved grades, increased attendance, and school engagement

"...He went from getting straight F's to the Dean's list in like one semester. Actually, that was in 7th grade, and in 8th grade [he] got a \$1200 scholarship for most improved student in the school." BTM Mentor

"Their relationship with boys to men has led to increased grades, better focus, better ownership of their responsibilities." MS Teacher

"I went from an F to a B+." Student

By the numbers...

- 90% of parents agree their son gets along better with others since participation in BTM.
- 54% of parents agree their son seems more engaged in school since participation in BTM.
- 63% of parents agree that their sons school attendance has increased since participation in BTM.
- 78% of students said that BTM has helped them go to school more often.
- 90% of students said BTM helped them to do better in school.

A:

BTM positively influences student behavior- There are less high level infractions at school, boys are happier, have a more positive outlook on life, have improved self-esteem, and engage in less risk-taking behavior

"He realizes that his life is really much better than perhaps he appreciates and that compared to many kids, he is very lucky." Parent Survey

"Once I joined boys to men I wasn't really that bully anymore that I saw in myself...I would look in the mirror and just see me, I wouldn't see that bully anymore." Student

"[School counselor] is the real key to the whole thing. If we didn't have one involved, I'm not sure it would have gotten the legging that it has. It's having someone on the staff connected with it, believing in it, and partnering with it that has made it so powerful."

- Principal

“They aren’t getting in trouble as much or at all. They are coming to school every day. It definitely makes an impact initially on their school experience.” School Counselor

“They’re able to make a conscious decision on how they want to live their lives rather than what their peers or parents expect from them.” BTM Mentor

By the numbers...

- 90% of parents agree their son gets along better with others since participation in BTM.
- 91% of parents agree their son is happier since participation in BTM.
- 91% of parents agree their son seems more positive since participation in BTM.
- 70% of parents agree their son is better at problem solving since participation in BTM.
- 90% of parents agree their son seems more mature since participation in BTM.
- 91% of parents agree their son acts more responsibly since participation in BTM.
- 81% of parents agree their son cares more for others since participation in BTM.
- 63% of parents agree their son controls his anger better since participation in BTM.
- 90% of parents agree their son seems to have improved self-esteem since participation in BTM.
- 60% of parents agree their son has engaged in less risk-taking behavior since participation in BTM.
- 95% of students said BTM makes them feel better about themselves
- 91% of students said BTM has positively changed how they view the future

A ● *BTM enhances boy’s relationships- Students are able to build friendships, they are able to trust adults, and they are able to communicate more effectively*

“It [BTM] has changed my life dramatically and helped me make friends and be able to trust older men.” Student

“My son seems to communicate better with me, he doesn’t seem to get upset as quickly, and if he does he seems to control it better.” Parent

“I find myself reflecting a little bit more critically and thinking about myself or what I’m doing or what I’m demonstrating to my own kids and also kids here.” Teacher

“Changes their [BTM participants] idea of what the world is and what opportunities they have” BTM Staff Member

By the numbers...

- 63% of parents agree their son communicates better with their mother since participation in BTM.
- 72% of parents agree their son communicates better with their father since participation in BTM.
- 100% of students said they feel accepted by the group.
- 86% of students said BTM helps them feel safe.
- 90% of students said BTM helps them build friendships.
- 81% of students said BTM makes it easier to talk to adults.
- 73% of students said BTM makes it easier to talk to their parents.
- 68% of students said BTM makes it easier to talk to teachers.
- 96% of students said BTM has helped them care about peoples' feelings

Q:

#3 To what extent are the goals of both organizations realized?

A:

Both the school and BTM benefits from maintaining the collaboration

“The cooperation with the principal and other staff has been excellent. There are cooperative activities that have occurred. They are supportive of the guys coming and they have expanded the program.” Mentor

“It definitely makes a difference in the climate at school. This is a group of boys who would probably just be getting in trouble and causing issues at school. So it affects the school climate in general. I think its also carrying it into the community in terms of these boys and what they do when they go home, or don't do.”
School Counselor

“[The school] gave us credibility.” BTM Staff Member

“The school gets better students and we get a higher rate of participation by the boys [in the program].”
Mentor

“I think that [school] has given BTM just a great place to come and set up shop and then on the flip side, BTM has given [our school] just a great gift and outlet for a lot of the young men.”

-Teacher

"I think that both entities have been able to give the other something that they've really been needing and they might not have even known they had needed." Teacher

By the numbers...

- 100% of parents strongly agree other schools should have BTM on their campus.

V. LIMITATIONS

While the qualitative research approach yielded rich, detailed and visceral feedback from participants, there are some limitations to note. First, the participants represented a convenience sample instead of rigorous random sample and, therefore, the findings cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the study participants.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

While much of the reviewed data and findings were positive, we must also highlight potential areas of improvement. This section summarizes the research team's recommendations and ideas for future growth. Because the majority of the data collected was directly related to the functioning of the BTM programming, these recommendations are most relevant to the BTM organization. The research team believes that making improvements to the BTM program will ultimately result in deepening the collaboration with the school and better accessing shared student outcomes.

Improve Communication

Several data sources indicated a need to develop further lines of communication with teachers and BTM parents. Parents stated that they would like to know more about what to reinforce with their children and what types of messages or topics were being discussed. Teachers primarily expressed an interest in being more informed about how to collaborate or become more involved with the BTM activities on the middle school campus.

While recognizing the need to honor the unique relationship established within BTM participation and mentoring, it may also be worthwhile to explore ways to realistically enhance communication. One potential idea would be organize an 'open house' where boys might be encouraged to share their growth with teachers and/or the greater middle school community. Similarly, it might also be fruitful for mentors to work with mentees to create some kind of report of event for parents to periodically inform them of the status of the mentoring relationship. Regardless of the mechanism, we suggest that both communication activities reflect the boys' perspective of their development and are given some ownership regarding what they decide to communicate.

Longitudinal Data Sources

A major challenge when conducting this study was accessing high quality student achievement data. Given the tight boundaries of data collection (one school year), it was difficult to see progress in both achievement data and school-related data (attendance and behavioral referrals). Ultimately, the research team hypothesized that the limited time frame, changes to the curriculum between 7th and 8th grade, and the wide range of academic identities and abilities across the study population affected our ability to quantitatively reflect the changes that were expressed so clearly within the qualitative data.

We suggest that the BTM organization invest in tracking students over time and pay particular attention to achievement data (GPA, state test scores, standardized tests), achievement –related data (attendance, behavioral referrals), and graduate outcomes (including post-secondary placement or plans).

Additionally, we suggest tracking significant benchmarks across the BTM service period. For example, the transition between middle school and high school may be crucially important to expressing the efficacy of the BTM approach. It is well recognized that the stakes of achievement outcomes across this transition take on a whole new sense of urgency. More specifically, the tradition of social promotion in middle school (promoting students to the next grade regardless of their academic standing) gives way to grade promotion solely based on credits earned. Documenting boys' ability to internalize lessons learned over time to successfully navigate this transition (as well as other benchmarks) should be emphasized as a major program tracking system.

BTM Participant Differentiation

Another added challenge in tracking students came in the form of lacking ways to differentiate the boys participating in BTM activities. Students entered the program with very diverse needs and ranged widely in terms of academic skill, behavior, and social emotional development. Arranging participants in terms of need or skill level may help to better establish progress with specific groups and identify those students that require deeper intervention. Several strategies may help to differentiate program participants. For example, an initial intake form, needs assessment, or research-based assessment would all be viable options.

Additionally, there may be some merit in tracking students based on their level of participation. For example, grouping participants as 'frequent participants' versus 'sporadic participants' (in conjunction with a more global intake process) may offer a clearer picture regarding the impact the BTM program.

Articulate Program Logic Model

Finally, the research team recommends that the BTM organization invest in better articulating their program logic model. Logic modeling is a systematic approach to enabling high quality program evaluation through processes designed to result in

pictorial representations of the theory of action of a program (Frechtling, 2007). Logic Modeling surfaces and summarizes the explicit and implicit “logic” of how a program operates to produce its desired benefits and results. Applying Logic Modeling to an analysis of the BTM program will help to fully explicate the relationships between structures and activities advocated by the program and their anticipated benefits so that these relationships can be tested in future evaluations of the program. We believe that this process is highly relevant to the above recommendations and will greatly aid in more rigorous forms of program evaluation (i.e., impact evaluations, performance evaluations, and quasi-experimental evaluations).

VII. CONCLUSION

As researchers, learning that a school and mentoring nonprofit had teamed up to work smarter in times of strapped resources had us wanting a closer look. Investigating the efficacy and reporting the findings of partnerships like the BTM/middle school collaboration underscores how reciprocal partnerships are established and encourages others to pursue similar collaborations and programming. Furthermore, this partnership offered mutual benefits for both organizations. The school benefitted by enhancing its services beyond what could normally be provided by the school counselor, and the BTM organization was able to increase access to its target population: at risk boys.

While this study elucidated several of the structures and workings of the collaboration, it also documented the efficacy of the BTM mentoring approach. Many of the boys within this study were coping with multiple compounding risk factors. The same risk factors that research shows are related to dropping out or incarceration. The case study findings indicated that program participants were able to improve academic performance, behavior, and relationships with adults. These results, taken into context with the challenges associated with this population, should spark a sense of hope and urgency in implementing similar partnerships and programming within other high-need schools. Based upon these findings and factors, we highly recommend investing in the further development, research and evaluation of the BTM organization and its partner schools.

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