

BACK STORY

CLARK COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT'S STAY IN SCHOOL MENTORING PROJECT

BY HEIDI PARRY STERN, ESQ.

THE NEXT TRAINING FOR POTENTIAL MENTORS IS SCHEDULED FOR AUGUST, WITH MENTORING SESSIONS STARTING IN OCTOBER.

Interested volunteers must submit a mentor application, participate in a face-to-face interview, agree to a background check, sign a release statement and participate in a short training session. For more information about the Stay in School Mentoring Project or the school district's other volunteer initiatives, please contact Kurt Arnold, program manager of the project for the Clark County School District. He can be reached at the School-Community Partnership Division of the school district at (702) 799-6560 or at karnold@interact.ccsd.net. As a testament to the power that these programs have to change lives, Arnold obtained his current position after years of actively participating as a volunteer with the school district, through his prior employer's participation in the Focus School Project.

Yes, we know it's summer, but in the hope that it's not too early to start thinking about the back-to-school season, *Nevada Lawyer* is pleased to profile one of the many worthwhile volunteer opportunities available through the Clark County School District. For those of you in Clark County, as you contemplate how to spend your valuable time once summer is over, participation in the school district's mentoring project is definitely worth considering. As attorneys, we all have knowledge and skills that are in demand. Some of the same skills that make us successful professionals can also be put to good use mentoring young students and helping them to formulate and achieve their own educational and career goals.

For 13 years, the school district has sponsored the Stay in School Mentoring Project, intended to provide support and guidance to middle school students at risk of dropping out. The mentoring project is intended to address the needs of at-risk students by recruiting volunteer mentors from the community. The mentors encourage the students to stay in school, while promoting continued education and career goals. Schools are chosen to participate in the project based on their "at-risk" nature, as defined by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunches. Students are then chosen by the guidance counselors at their schools. Both the students and the students' parents or guardians must agree to the students' participation in the program.

The mentoring project focuses on middle school, as this is the age when students begin to contemplate dropping out of school. The project focuses on providing an adult mentor to encourage and motivate the student to set and achieve educational and career goals, as well as to help the student recognize the importance of education in achieving future success.

The need for volunteers is great. Twenty-five middle schools currently participate in the program, with approximately 200 adult volunteers offering mentorship to at-risk students. Unfortunately, the number of at-risk students in need of mentors far outpaces the supply of adult volunteers.

Volunteers to the mentorship project must be willing to make a commitment of one hour per week over the course of the school year. These one-hour mentoring sessions are conducted on school grounds and provide the time and space for the mentor to meet with, counsel and otherwise assist his or her assigned student mentee. The project requires volunteers to make only a one-year commitment, although the school district reports that students do best with a multi-year commitment from a mentor. Male volunteers are particularly needed, as the school district tries to match students with mentors of their own gender.

The mentoring project works together with other school district initiatives to provide as much volunteer support as possible to Clark County schools. Businesses, law firms and other organizations, for example, can participate in the school district's Focus School Project. In this project, schools are matched one-on-one with businesses and other organizations to bring additional resources to at-risk schools. Individual employees of the organization can then choose to participate in the mentoring project as well. For those individuals who would like to volunteer, but who need a more flexible commitment level, the school district also offers the PAYBAC program, in which volunteers go to area schools and present speeches intended to motivate students to stay in school and to expose them to an array of career possibilities. ■

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