An Annual Evaluation Brief

Seedling's Promise: A Mentoring Program for Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2010-2011

What is Seedling's Promise?

Seedling's Promise is a school-based mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents. The purpose of the program is two-fold:

- To provide all children who have incarcerated parents with a long-term, positive relationship with a trained adult mentor, in hopes they may be better able to navigate the challenges experienced during this period of family separation; and
- To help the children develop or maintain positive attitudes towards and connections to school, so that they may have a clear understanding of the critical need for education to achieve their long-term goals.

How large is the program?

The program started in 2006 and grew significantly each year until 2010, serving hundreds of children. In the 2010-2011 school year, program funding leveled, and program growth stabilized to ensure each child and mentor received the case management support needed to grow a healthy, sustained mentoring relationship. While there was a decrease in the number of children served in 2010-2011, the program supported 27 schools in Austin ISD and one school in Pflugerville ISD. The program staff also assisted mentors who continued mentoring relationships with children who moved to schools not officially supported by the program. Thirty-two "satellite" schools were served.

Table 1: In 2010-2011, Seedling Program Growth Leveled

School Year	# of Children Served	# of Schools Served	% Increase
2006-07	115	15	
2007-08	178	21	54.8%
2008-09	320	28	79.8%
2009-10	408	26	27.5%
2010-11	369	28	-9.5%

Source: Seedling's Promise program enrollment records, 2006-2011.

Who are the children?

The children participating in Seedling's Promise are in grades Pre-K through 12th grade. Most of them are low-income and minority. Most are Hispanic. Some are English language learners and have special education needs. Due to the incarceration of their parent(s), they are often highly mobile and may not have been consistently enrolled in or attending a single school.

About Program Funding

In 2010-2011, this program operated on funds provided by multiple sources. Austin Independent School District's Department of School Family and Community Education provided a total of $65,750 to support the program. This contribution included local school district and grant dollars. Austin Energy provided $15,000. Individual donations in support of Seedling's Promise totaled $245,190. No federal funding was available to support the program in the 2010-2011 school year, as in years past.

Understanding This Report

A variety of quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analyzed for this evaluation. Due to availability, only data for mentees enrolled in Austin ISD were examined in this report. The Seedling mentees (n=316) included in the analyses were listed as active program participants at the end of the school year. Comparison students (n= 315) were actively enrolled in the same schools with Seedling mentees and documented as having economically disadvantaged and at-risk status in the state Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize outcomes for each group. Tests of significance were conducted to determine if statistical differences existed between the two groups' academic outcomes. Statistically significant findings ($p<.05$) are marked with *. Contextual analyses were used to summarize themes that emerged from open-ended survey questions and focus group interviews.

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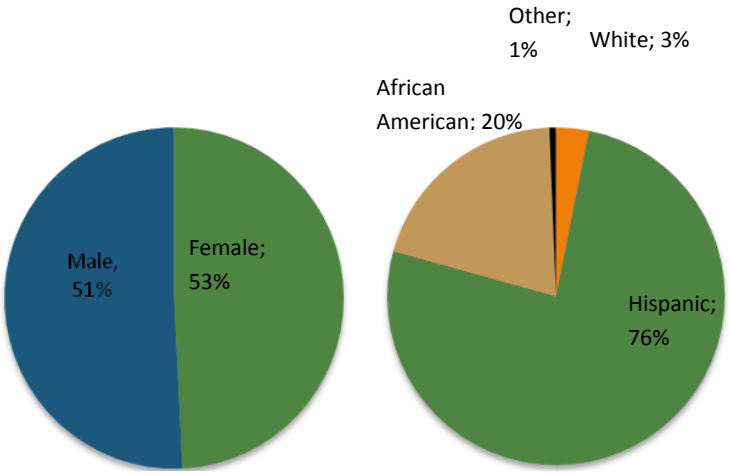
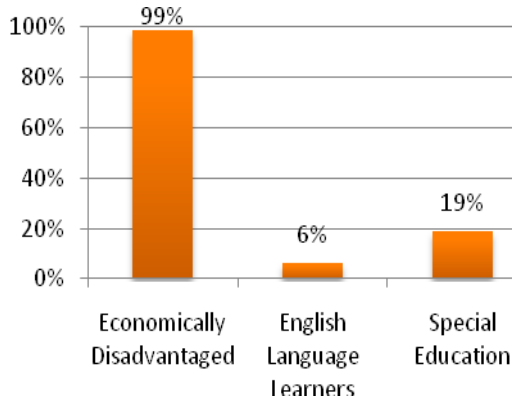
Figures 1-3: Most children served by Seedling's Promise are low income and minority.





Source. Austin ISD student enrollment records, 2010-2011.

How Long Do Seedling Mentoring Relationships Last?

Figure 4: In 2010-2011, the duration of mentoring relationships increased from the previous year, lasting an average 17 months. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found significant benefits in mentoring relationships when the relationships were at least 12 months in duration. Further, researchers argue mentoring relationships terminating prematurely, 3 months or less, have no clear benefits and may be detrimental for the child in some isolated cases.

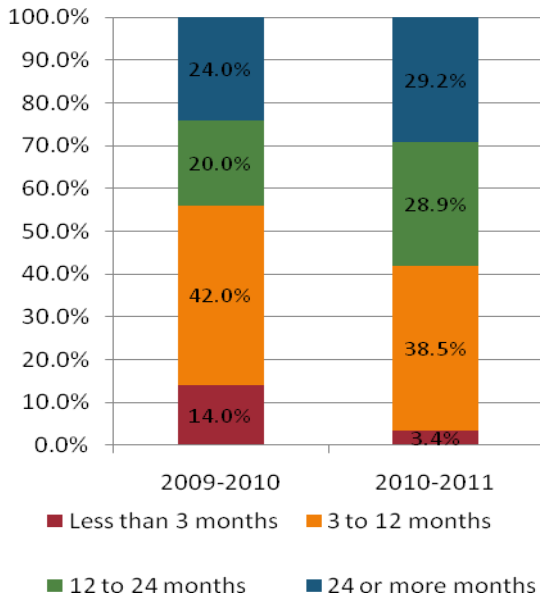
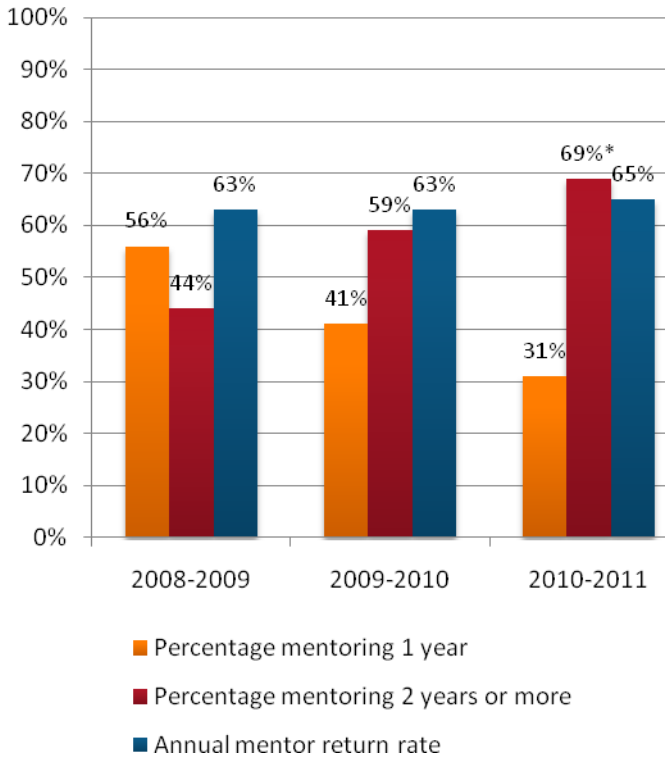


Figure 5: The average commitment of mentors to the program was approximately two years, above the national average of 1 year. The percentage of mentors who mentored two years or more significantly increased in 2010-2011.



Source. Seedling program records, 2010-2011. (*p<.05)

Seedling's Promise: A Mentoring Program for Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2010-2011

What do school contacts and teachers say about the program?

Academic Support

- Overall, teachers observed that most children who participated in Seedling's Promise were engaging in positive academic behaviors in their classrooms.
- Almost 60% of teachers believed the child's academic efforts improved throughout the school year as a result of the program, while 21% were unsure.

Classroom Behaviors

- Overall, teachers observed that most children who participated in Seedling's Promise were engaging in positive interpersonal behaviors in their classrooms.
- 58% of teachers believed the child's classroom behavior improved throughout the school year as a result of the program, while 22% were unsure.

Mentoring Relationship

- 100% of the school contacts believed the mentoring relationship was "Extremely helpful" to the children.
- 91% of teachers reported that their students looked forward to seeing their mentor each week
- 92% recommended that the child continue the mentoring relationship in the next school year.

Technical Note. Program surveys were administered to program stakeholders in Spring 2011. In 2010-2011, 65% of school contacts, 65% of teachers, 67% of mentors, and 84% of students responded. The response rates were determined to be representative at a 95% confidence-level for all groups.

From a teacher's perspective…

"My student has had a very positive, meaningful relationship with her mentor, and I appreciate the mentor's genuine interest in the child's academic and social success."

"My student's mentor has been great. He is a constant reliable positive male role model for a boy. The mentor has been coming once a week and on special occasions… He has gone above and beyond. My student has learned to admit that he is important to others who care for him. He looks forward to the times his mentor visits him. I am so thankful for what the mentor (through your program) has done for my student. Please continue to support our children."

"The improvement this year is remarkable. The children in my class have a very strong relationship with their mentors, and I hope they will be able to continue in middle school where the children will need them even more. This year has shown the best results of any year I have worked with the program."

"It always brought a big smile to my student's face when she saw her mentor. It made her feel special."

Teachers, Spring 2011

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What do mentors say about the program?

On program surveys:

Program Implementation and Support

- Almost all mentors were highly satisfied with program administrative processes such as recruitment, orientation, training, and personalized support.
- All mentors completed at least 2.5 hours of orientation training, and most reported using strategies from their Mentor Minutes newsletter.
- Above the required orientation training, mentor training was well attended with about 25% of mentors attending each additional training event.
- Mentor reported they were very interested in the training topics and that the trainings were valuable. However, work and personal commitments prevented consistent participation.

Relationship with Mentee

- 96% of mentors reported excellent or good relationships with their mentees.
- 86% of the mentors saw their mentees weekly, and 11% visited with their mentees every other week. Three percent saw their mentee once a month at other intervals.
- 83% of the mentors reported their time with mentees to be extremely or mostly helpful, a significant increase from 76% last year.
- All mentors rated their overall experience with the program as excellent or good, a significant increase from 95% last year.
- 83% of mentors planned to continue the mentoring relationship in the 2010-2011 school year, compared with 80% last year.

In focus groups:

- Mentors were concerned about their abilities to provide an optimum mentoring experience.
- Mentors were highly satisfied with recruitment, orientation, training, and support processes.
- Mentors identified benefits for the child:
  - time for fun,
  - positive, reliable role-models,
  - added layer of support, and
  - opportunity to build the child's confidence and self-esteem.

> *"The training and support from Seedling is what helps keep you motivated and excited to be a mentor throughout the year. It reminds me of my role, boundaries, and helps me take pride in my mentoring relationship."*
>
> *I feel that my mentee and I have a very open and honest relationship. I can tell that she feels comfortable telling me things that she may not tell other people. My mentee also listens when I have suggestions for how she can handle things at school or with friends differently."*
>
> *"I have mentored the same child for three years. We have trust and genuine affection for each other. Our relationship has slowly focused more on the school setting and academic performance is a shared goal between us. This focus took a while to establish, but we both finally accept and even appreciate that our relationship is school-based."*
>
> *Mentors, Spring 2011*

Mentors' Words…

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What do children say about the program?

Overall, the mentee responses were highly positive in Spring 2011 and consistent with findings in previous program years.

In regards to the mentoring relationship, most of the children…

- felt happy and important when they were with their mentors,
- trusted their mentors, and
- believed their mentors listened to them and were supportive.

In regards to student outcomes, most children reported that they

- felt good about themselves,
- avoided drugs and alcohol,
- looked forward to seeing their mentors,
- "tried their best" on schoolwork, and
- tried to "stay out of trouble at school."

The mentee's comments indicated that their mentors were fun and supportive. The children often commented on how caring their mentors were. Consistent with previous years' findings, many of the comments indicated that strong relationships were developing between the children and their mentors. When the children were asked about what they would change about the program, most of the mentees said, "nothing." However, many of them requested that they see their mentors more often.

"She always listens to my problems and gives me good advice and when I take it -it really works and helps me improve my life."

"He comes every week and we play basketball and talk."

"She really loves being with me and she always cares about how I feel or what I do, so I love her."

"He has lots to talk about, gives me advice, talks about my education, cares, is never bored."

"She is always there for me. Whenever I am down, she listens to what I say. She is nice and sweet."

"He is always there when I need him. He is very special to me."

"He does a lot of nice and helpful things that help me at home and school."

"He remembers what we talk about."

"When she comes we play games, laugh and talk. My family really likes her."

Mentees, Spring 2011

The best thing about my mentor…

tagxedo.com

Does Mentoring Result in Academic Benefits for Students?

Attendance

In regards to school attendance, Seedling mentees had similar attendance rates, compared with other students attending the same schools (Table 2). This finding is considered positive, given that the mentees are a highly mobile population and may be experiencing circumstances that negatively influence regular school attendance. Further, mentees reported on their surveys that they tried to be in school on the days their mentors were scheduled to visit.

Table 2. Seedling mentee attendance remained consistent across school years and comparable to students attending the same schools. The district-wide attendance rate was 95% in 2010-2011.

Attendance	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Seedling Mentees	95%*	94%*	94%
Comparison Group	94%*	92%	94%

Sources. AISD student attendance files, 2008-2009 through 2010-2011. (*p<.05)

Discipline

In the area of student discipline, a significantly higher percentage of Seedling mentees had discipline infractions, compared with their peers (Table 3). However, the average and maximum number of offenses decreased from the previous year for Seedling mentees (Figure 6). Seedling mentees tended to get into the same type of "trouble" as their peers, with most of their offenses being low-level in nature and not requiring mandatory removal from the instructional setting (Table 4). These findings are considered positive, as research indicates that children with incarcerated parents are more likely to exhibit physical aggression and classroom behavior difficulties than their peers (*Trzcinski, E., Satayanathan, D., and Ferro, L., 2002).*

Table 3. While more Seedling mentees had discipline infractions, they were similar to their peers overall.

	2009-2010		2010-2011	
	Seedling Mentees	Comparison Group	Seedling Mentees	Comparison Group
% of students with ANY disciplinary offense	24.4%	21.5%	33.0%*	13.0%
Average # of Offenses	7	5	6	5
Median (the middle)	4	3	3	3
Mode (most frequent)	1	1	1	1
Maximum # of Offenses	57	78	42	26

Source. AISD student discipline files, 2008-2009 through 2010-2011. (*p>.05)

Figure 6. Overall, Seedling mentees had had fewer disciplinary infractions in 2010-2011, compared with the previous year.

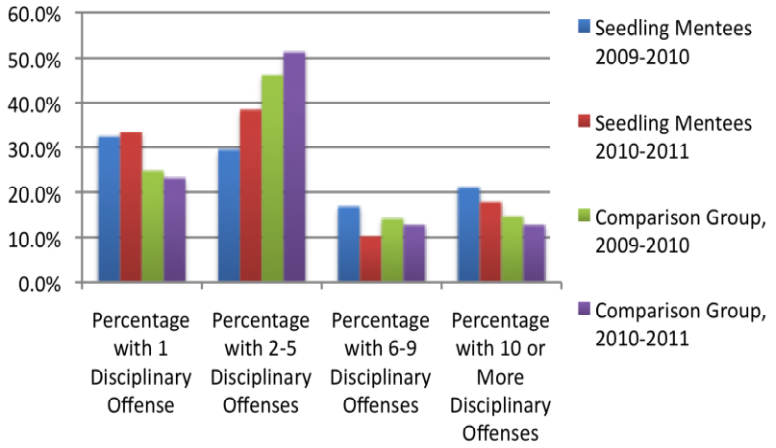

Table 4. Most Seedling mentees and their peers had similar types of disciplinary offenses.

Top 10 Disciplinary Offense Types, 2010-2011		
	Seedling Mentees	Comparison Group
1	Rude to Adult	Disruption
2	Disruption	Insubordination
3	Insubordination	Physical Aggression -Student
4	Physical Aggression -Student	Rude to Adult
5	Rude to Student	Class cut
6	Fighting	Threat or Harassment-Student
7	Class cut	Tardy
8	Leave Without Authority	Leave Without Authority
9	Threat or Harassment-Student	Fighting
10	Theft	Gang Related Activity*

Source. AISD student discipline files, 2008-2009 through 2010-2011. (p>.05) * Indicates *Higher- level offense.*

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)

On the teacher, mentor, and mentee surveys, respondents believed mentoring helped to improve academic achievement. Across school years, TAKS passing results were mixed for Seedling mentees when compared by the duration of their program participation (Table 5). It should be noted that program participants vary from year to year, as does length of their participation. When compared with their peers attending the same schools, Seedling mentees did as well or better on the Reading and Math TAKS tests across school years. The testing outcomes for the Seedling mentees are considered positive, since children who have incarcerated parents often encounter additional challenges to their academic growth (e.g., regular attendance, mobility, discipline issues, pre-occupation with home circumstances, etc.), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has reported that 70% of children with incarcerated parents exhibit poor academic performance (http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/Incarceration&Family /ch4.shtml).

Table 5. Compared with their peers, Seedling mentees did as well or better on the Reading and Math TAKS tests across school years.

	Reading TAKS Test: Percentage Who Met Standard			Math TAKS Test: Percentage Who Met Standard		
	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011
<3 months	80.0	83.3	NR	66.7	69.5	NR
3-12 months	89.5	82.3	75.3*	60.7	78.9*	75.3
12-24 months	78.1	62.5*	80.0*	48.6	69.7*	85.0*
24+ months	66.7	63.2	65.4	33.3	74.5*	64.1*
Seedling mentees	80.0*	72.1	74.3	54.5	74.6*	72.6
Comparison group	66.4	74.1	74.0	49.8	65.1	74.5

Source. Austin ISD TAKS test files, June 2011. *Notes. Data include scored tests only for active students in 2010 with scored tests during the spring 2009 and 2011 TAKS administrations. Retests are not included. NR=Less than 5 students are not reported to protect confidentiality. (*p<.05)*

In Summary

1. Are the children provided with long-lasting mentoring relationships? Yes. Most Seedling mentoring relationships last beyond the national average and exceed the threshold found to be beneficial for the child.
2. Do participants like the program and believe it to be valuable? Yes. Teachers, mentors and mentees highly rated the program and highly valued their experiences.
3. Knowing that children who have incarcerated parents often have low academic performance, did Seedling mentees experience positive academic outcomes? Yes. Most Seedling mentees had attendance and test passing rates that were as good or better than their peers.
4. Were Seedling mentees more likely to get in trouble at school? Yes. On average, more Seedling mentees had at least discipline infraction. However, on average, they did not have a higher number of offenses, nor were their offenses any more severe in nature than their peers attending the same schools.
5. There seems to be a community need for this program, will the program continue to grow? Seedling's Promise prioritizes intensive support for the children and their mentors. With the current level of funding, program growth is stabilized to ensure each child and mentor receives the case management support needed to grow a healthy, sustained mentoring relationship. The size of the program will be re-evaluated every year.
6. Is this a good program? Yes. The program is well managed and results across data sources reveal consistently positive results for the children across program implementation years.

What does all of this mean?

Consistent with previous years' findings, the program evaluation results revealed effective, thoughtful program implementation resulting in positive outcomes for children served by the program. Most mentees had relatively long-term positive relationships with a well-trained mentor, positive attitudes about their mentoring experience, and academic outcomes as good as or better than their peers. Thus, it might be expected that many children and mentors will continue to engage in stable, long-term mentoring relationships and positive outcomes for the children of incarcerated parents will continue to be realized.

What are the implications of these findings?

The findings from this report indicate that the program staff have prioritized and focused on the appropriate program development and implementation activities and support systems. Consistent with years past, program staff should continue:

- Identifying and securing additional and ongoing funding sources to continue the program's commitment to the children in the community.
- Using research-based practices to develop mentor training and support services and include innovative ways to extend support for mentors.
- Managing program growth. The plan should determine the Foundation's capacity to continue serving children well, while still addressing need in the community.
- Developing community collaborations. The collaborations develop community awareness of the needs of children with incarcerated parents and help all organizations involved to work more effectively.
- Exploring the affective and academic outcomes for the mentees as mentoring relationships continue.