

Parents Section



Mentor Puts Afterburners In After-School Programs



Photo by Jon Randolph

Daniel Bassill is president and CEO of the Tutor/Mentor Connection, a non-profit agency that serves as a resource for finding and starting after-school programs. He also has run a tutoring program for more than 20 years.

by Michael Vaughn

Around 3 p.m. every school day, thousands of Chicago's working parents think: What is my child going to do now that school is out?

Around 8 a.m. every work day, Daniel Bassill thinks: What can we do today to get more students involved in productive after-school programs?

Parents, meet Daniel Bassill. He is president and CEO of the Tutor/Mentor Connection, a program run by the non-profit organization Cabrini Connections that links hundreds of after-school programs in Chicago and works to increase their availability.

Bassill estimates that 18,000 Chicago children receive help from the nearly 10,000 volunteers who serve the 250 mentoring and other programs that make up the Tutor/Mentor Connection, located at the Montgomery Ward offices at 535 W. Chicago Ave. But he relays the numbers with more of a sense of anticipation than satisfaction. "There are plenty of neighborhoods that don't have programs," Bassill says, "and we need to get them started."

For parents in neighborhoods where no programs exist, Bassill says he has a suggestion.

"If there's no program nearby, parents can start one themselves," he said. "Check with the people running existing programs in the area for some ideas on how to get started."

The CPS' directory of tutoring and mentoring programs, which focuses on school-based programs, or the Tutor/Mentor Connection's own directory, which is available at all branches of the Chicago Public Library, can help. The Tutor/Mentor Connection can also be

reached by phone at (312) 467-2889.

"Someone has to take the role of leader," Bassill added. "A lot of people say, 'Well, that's way beyond me,' but most of the time they already know the people who can help because they belong to community groups, either through work, church, or social clubs."

Bassill himself has run a tutoring program, called Kids' Connection, in the Cabrini-Green area since the mid-1970s. He directed the program while working full time in Montgomery Ward's advertising department until he left the company and helped start Cabrini Connections in 1990. His message to parents who are thinking about organizing an after-school program is the same that he says tutors and mentors should convey to their students: "I did it; you can too."

One of the keys to making it happen, according to Bassill, is helping potential supporters--whether they be business people, church members, or other parents--understand the importance of preparing children for school.

"The teachers can only do so much with a classroom that is filled with students who don't want to learn," Bassill said. The community support for establishing after-school programs will come when businesses see how mentoring leads to a well-educated work force, he added, and when parents and community leaders work together to provide role models for children in neighborhoods where they can too easily fall victim to the influences of the streets.

The best cure for the 3 o'clock blues, according to Bassill, is a child who is excited by learning. He said, "The most important thing we can do is to convey to children the importance of learning."