

## Mentor projects seek stronger role in STW

*Chicago program aims for the heart and ego of businesses*

In 1993, Dan Bassill left a nonprofit group that linked mentors with youths because it served students in grades 2-6 only. He felt the program stopped at a critical stage—just when students start to think about careers and need more guidance from adults.

"You don't go to work when you're in the sixth grade," said Bassill, president and CEO of Cabrini Connection's Tutor/Mentor Connection in Chicago, which he started to pick up where the other nonprofit left off: grades 7-12.

Still, Bassill stressed it's important to encourage companies to reach out to students earlier in their lives.

"It might start as early as first grade with mentoring and grow into job shadowing so we get more kids ready to go into [work-based learning] programs rather than just trying to tap kids in 10th through 11th grade who have made it that far and are eligible for those programs," he said.

### Preparing for STW

Over the past five years Bassill has slowly built his

program—which serves a high-poverty neighborhood in the city—from a staff of seven volunteers serving five youths to 130 volunteers serving 110 teenagers.

His group doesn't have a formal school-to-work program, but Bassill said that's a priority and he plans to use the same recruiting techniques he's employed to find volunteer mentors.

"In many cases our kids stop attending our program at the 10th and 11th grade because they have had to get a job," he said. "We'd like those jobs to be [STW] jobs, to be places where they use their brains, [and have] resources, training programs and mentoring to help us keep the student in school and headed toward a diploma and a possible career in the company."

As he forges ahead to find companies to partner with in a STW initiative, Bassill explains to them that linking with schools and offering work experiences and soft skills—such as communication, teamwork and attitude—from an early age through college can build a better prepared workforce in their neighborhood.

In Chicago, he says, tooling and manufacturing and software associations are crying for entry-level

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## A little arm twisting

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workers, yet they're not reaching into their neighborhoods to "grow their own."

Bassill said he doesn't want company leaders to simply shell out money as part of their companies' philanthropy, but rather wants them to engage in a "human resource development strategy" that includes working with youths. "We need companies that come in and look at what they can bring to the table to make this happen."

The potential of mentors as a tool in STW has caught the attention of others.

Another mentoring group ready to kick off its operations also plans to use its volunteers to help students see the link between academics and work. Mentoring for Occupational Readiness and Employment in St. Charles, Ill., aims to eventually provide career planning services, employability skills training and placement services for its youths, said Mark Claypool, the company's president.

### Painted into a corner

Bassill is savvy in getting businesses to join the mentor program: He uses their competitive zeal and throws in a little guilt.

When he attends volunteer fairs or other conferences around the city, Bassill said he pulls out maps of his community and highlights the areas with the highest concentrations of poverty and youth deaths and the location of poor schools. He'll also mark where youth agencies are located.

When top company officials attend he'll find their businesses' location on the map and ask them what their firms are doing at these sites to make a difference for kids living within a mile radius. Some of those who hem and haw come back the following year touting their new programs and seeking recognition, Bassill said.

Their competitors long for the same recognition and develop their own programs, he said. "It becomes a cavalry charge. As one horse goes out in front of the others, the rest of them move faster to catch up."

He says he will use the same strategy to find STW partners.

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