

On the Right Track Mentoring Program

Sylvia Anthony-McGeachy  
[smanthon@ncsu.edu](mailto:smanthon@ncsu.edu)

Kendrick Alston, Principal Williford Elementary School  
Mailing Address: 801 Williford Street, Rocky Mount, NC 27803  
(252) 937-9030

Elizabeth Jenkins, Principal Baskerville Elementary School  
Mailing Address: 1100 Stokes Avenue, Rocky Mount, NC 27801  
(252) 451-2880

Gary Major, Principal Parker Middle School  
Mailing Address: 1500 E. Virginia Street, Rocky Mount, NC 27801  
(252) 937-9060

Michelle Royster, Principal DS Johnson Elementary School  
Mailing Address: 600 N. Fairview Road, Rocky Mount, NC 27801  
(252) 451-2895

Chris Sivills, Principal Edwards Elementary School  
Mailing Address: 720 Edwards Street, Rocky Mount, NC 27803  
(252) 937-9025

Roderick Tillery, Sr., Principal Rocky Mount Middle School  
Mailing Address: 841 Nash Street, Rocky Mount, NC 27804  
(252) 462-2010

Nash County, NC

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**Abstract**

The On the Right Track Mentoring Program fulfills a need and provides students with an opportunity to interact with positive role models that work in a field in which students are interested. The Program seeks to address the emotional and mental issues that prevent participants from recognizing their self-worth. Mentors will check-in with their mentee at least once monthly other than scheduled workshop sessions. Workshops will be provided monthly based on topics that will assist students in navigating through the challenges they will face. Mentees will visit colleges and universities, as well as job shadow in a career field they would like to pursue. There will be frequent evaluations to measure the effectiveness of the program for all participants.

Key Terms: incarceration, mentor, mentee,

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## **I. Background Significance**

Incarceration impacts not only the incarcerated, but also those left behind, many of which are minor children. By 2007, more than 1.7 million children had a parent incarcerated in a state or federal prison according to the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (Merenstein, Tyson, Tilles, Keays, and Ruffolo, 2011). The Sentencing Project (2011) estimates that 1 in every 50 children in the United States has an incarcerated parent. It was estimated by the Sentencing Project (2013) that in 2011 there were 695,960 incarcerated parents of which 639,460 were fathers and 56,500 were mothers. However, this is only an estimate since overtime many more children are impacted. States do not request or keep information regarding families of arrested or convicted persons (Simmons, 2000). This makes it difficult to gather statistics on the number of children with incarcerated parents. Unless the incarcerated is questioned as to their parental status, this information may not be provided.

When a parent is incarcerated, a two-income family is reduced to one resulting in financial hardship. The loss of additional income contributes to children of incarcerated parents living in poverty (Aaron, 2010). Children may withdraw emotionally, become delinquent, risk failure in school, or risk intergenerational incarceration if positive intervention does not occur (Simmons, 2000). Children may often be unsupervised as the remaining parent may be required to work two or more jobs or longer hours to make up for lost income (Aaron, 2010). Lack of supervision increases the possibility of juvenile delinquency adding to parental stress. In such situations, children may encounter harsher punishment by the remaining parent. The loss of income also contributes to higher rates of poverty in families with an incarcerated parent. Incarceration of a parent puts a financial strain on the family. According to statistics presented by the Sentencing Project (2013), more than 40% of those incarcerated in 2010 lived with children prior to being incarcerated and half of those were the main source of income.

### ***Psychological Impact***

The impact of children of incarcerated parents is tremendous. Typically, the impact of a mother being incarcerated is more devastating than a father since mothers are usually the primary caregivers (Simmons, 2000). Often children witness the arrest of the parent causing issues with their development. Simmons (2000) notes that children may suffer many psychological problems to include trauma, anxiety, guilt, shame and fear. If not addressed, these problems will manifest themselves into even larger issues.

### ***Juvenile Delinquency***

Children of incarcerated parents often exhibit delinquent behavior themselves. If their parent is a repeat offender, children may find themselves in the vicious cycle of becoming a criminal. Children often blame themselves or lack positive self-esteem. It is challenging to raise children in a two family household, but it becomes even more difficult in a single parent household. Most often the absentee parent is a father leaving children without a male influence in the household. Children with absentee positive role models find themselves seeking acceptance in the wrong places. It is critical that these children have positive role models or mentors that are willing to work with them toward achieving their goals.

### ***Impact of Mentoring***

There is research that supports intervening in the life of children with incarcerated parents to reduce or prevent delinquent behavior as well as promote healthy child development (Merenstein, et al., 2011). Youth may initially resist acceptance of a mentor. Youth may lack trust in adults feeling “let down” due to adults constantly moving in and out of their lives (Merenstein, et al, 2011).

### ***Societal Impact***

Children with an incarcerated parent may incur additional expenses for states since children of incarcerated parents tend to use mental health, child welfare, medical and economic services at a higher rate than other children (Sentencing Project, 2013).

***National Statistics.*** The Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010) reported an estimated 809,800 prisoners with minor children. Parents incarcerated reported having an estimated 1,705,600 minor children accounting for 2.3% of the U.S. population under the age of 18 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Glaze and Maruschak’s (2010) statistics indicated that the number of children with mothers in prison had increased by 131% and the number of children with an incarcerated father in state or federal prison had grown by 77%. Data further showed that black children (6.7%) were seven times more likely than their white counterparts (0.9%) to have an incarcerated parent whereas Hispanic children (2.4%) were two and a half times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated parent (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

***North Carolina Statistics.*** The incarceration rate in North Carolina has increased from approximately 200 per 100,000 in 1978 to approximately 375 per 100,000 in 2011 (Prison Policy Initiative, 2012). There was an estimated 695,460 parents incarcerated in state prisons in 2011 (Sentencing Project, 2013). North Carolina accounted for approximately 18,190 incarcerated parents (Sentencing Project, 2013). Of that number, 16,910 were fathers and 1,280 were mothers.

***Nash County Statistics.*** Although data specific to children of incarcerated parents in Nash County could not be located, the crime rate in Rocky Mount has exceeded the national average since 2001 according to the City-Data website. Whereas the national average is 294.5 per 100,000, Rocky Mount has an average crime rate of 558.3 per 100,000 based on 2013 data from the City-Data website. The population in Nash County for 2013 was 94,357 with 22.9% or those being children under the age of 18. Based on information presented by the Sentencing Project (2013) indicating 1 in 50 children have an incarcerated parent, 432 children in the county have an incarcerated parent. An interview was conducted with a social worker that services three of the partner schools to gather a more accurate number of students impacted by parental incarceration. Of the two schools located in the projects with a total student population of 745 students, at least 15% or 111 students have had a parent incarcerated, while incarceration has impacted 10% or 41 students at the third school with a population of 412 students. Each of these 152 children is at risk of academic failure, a potential dropout statistic, or may become a delinquent minor without the presence of a mentor or positive influence in their life.

## II. Goals and Objectives

The On the Right Track Program is designed to prevent children of incarcerated parents from becoming part of the cycle of delinquency and criminal behavior by pairing them with a mentor in a career field of which they have an interest.

### Short-Term Goals

- By the end of the second year of the program, 100% of mentees will have a better understanding of academic requirements to enter into field of study/work as indicated by a pre- and post survey.
- By the end of the second year of the program, 80% of the participants who have participated in at least 50% of the program sessions will increase their school attendance by 40% over their previous attendance rate.

### Mid-Term Goals

- By the end of year three, 80% of participants will increase their academic achievement by 40% over four years as measured by Lexile and Quantile levels on EOGs.
- By the end of year four of the program, 50% of participants in grades 10 and 11 who have successfully completed the program will attend monthly sessions for at least two years serving as Peer Mentors to incoming 3<sup>rd</sup> grade mentees.

### Long-Term Goals

- By the end of year six, at least 80% of participants from year one of the program that are seniors will graduate high school on time.
- At least 85% of participants will attend the college of their choice.
- Of the participants applying for employment after high school graduation, 100% will obtain employment in their area of interest.

## III. Program Design

The On the Right Track Mentoring Program is designed to prevent juvenile delinquency, dropout rates, and mental health issues in children of incarcerated parents. The program will provide students with incarcerated parents a support system to guide them on a path to success by partnering them with a mentor, as well as counseling to assist them in dealing with the absence of the parent. Key to the success of the program is pairing the student with the right mentor. Prior to student recruitment or program implementation, a staff must be hired. The grantee will serve as the site coordinator for the first year of the grant. The position for the data

collector will be in collaboration with the local colleges and advertised as a paid internship position.

***Advisory Committee Representatives.*** Six individuals will be asked to participate on the On the Right Track Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee will be operational prior to selection of students and mentors (See Timeline in Appendix E). Representatives of the committee will include the social worker from Williford, the guidance counselor from Baskerville, the assistant principals from Parker Middle and Edwards Middle, the principal from Rocky Mount Middle, and a teacher from DS Johnson. These individuals will be selected based on their expertise and community connections. The committee will serve a key role in selecting student and adult participants. Prior to the beginning of the program, mentors will attend an orientation regarding their commitment and the program expectations. Attendance at the Prisoners Family Conference will also be offered to two program staff members and one mentor. Conference attendees will be selected by the Advisory Committee.

***Selection of Student Participants.*** Thirty students in 3<sup>rd</sup> thru 7<sup>th</sup> grades who currently have an incarcerated parent will be recruited as a participant as indicated on the Timeline in Appendix E. Students will be recruited from the inner-city schools of Rocky Mount to include Baskerville Elementary, DS Johnson Elementary, Edwards Middle, Parker Middle, Rocky Mount Middle, and Williford Elementary. Students will be recruited from these schools due to the demographics with a student population of 99% black. Participation in the program is voluntary, however; mentees who participate will be asked to sign a contract to agree to participate in the program for at least a one-year period. The mentor and custodial parent or guardian will also be asked to sign the contract to demonstrate their commitment to the program.

***Matching Mentee with Mentor.*** In order to match students with an appropriate mentor, students will complete a career interest survey to determine which career path best fits their personality, as well as the field each is interested in. The selection of the right adult mentors is paramount to the success of the On the Right Track Mentoring program. Twenty-five adults who are experts in career fields of which students are interested will be recruited and selected as adult mentors for current youth with at least one incarcerated parent. Mentors will have to pass a background check and drug screening to be completed by LabCorp. Mentors will be recruited from Nash-Rocky Mount Public Schools business partners, school business partners, and other local resources based on identified career choices.

***Curriculum Development.*** The Advisory committee along with the site coordinator will collaborate on creating a curriculum using resources from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. In addition, workshop presenters will use approved curriculum resources from their individual agencies that support the goals of the program. It will be highly encouraged that both adult and youth participants attend at least four out of six workshops in order to foster relationship building. This will give the mentor an opportunity to experience sessions with the mentee in order to facilitate dialogue regarding the program if they meet other than during program sessions.

***Education Opportunities.*** Mentors will receive 8 hours of training on the program philosophy and the role of the mentor prior to the first mentor-mentee meeting (See Appendix E). In addition, mentors will have counseling sessions with other individuals responsible for the wellbeing of the mentee in order to understand challenges faced by children of incarcerated

parents. Counseling sessions will include the mentor, the custodial parent, school officials, and the mentee.

**Monthly Workshops.** Monthly sessions will be presented September through May by an expert in each topic to mentees. Topics to be covered include Preparing for the Workforce, Preparing for College, Etiquette, Communication Skills, Financial Literacy, and Literacy as indicated on Appendix E. Each topic will cover information that is useful not only in shaping the mentees as productive citizens, but also in navigating through life as a student. The workshops will be interactive involving role-play so all attendees are a part of the learning process. Crucial to being prepared for college or a career is having an awareness of socially acceptable norms and appropriate dress, as well as how to code switch when engaging in formal dialogue versus informal conversations. Students of incarcerated parents often find themselves in poverty due to the loss of a second income or may have very little concept of how to manage money. An important factor in avoiding poverty is living within ones means by understanding how to manage money. In order for mentees to be successful in either college or a career, they must have the basic skills to read for comprehension and be able to communicate.

**The Healing Process.** Students with incarcerated parents deal with many mental health and self-esteem issues. To assist students in dealing with their feelings and identifying triggers, mental health sessions will be provide. The sessions will be facilitated by a mental health professional that is experienced in dealing with children of incarcerated parents. The sessions will be scheduled on days when workshops are planned for four-hour sessions. Parents, mentors, school administrators, and teachers will be invited to participate in several sessions both with and separate from students in order to provide healing and understanding to those involved in the mentees life. All trainings and workshops will be held at one of the serviced schools.

**Mentor-Mentee Check-Ins.** There will be monthly mentor-mentee check-ins (See Timeline on Appendix E). To verify communication is happening between the mentor and mentee, an Advisory Committee member will be responsible for making contact with the mentee at least once a month outside the regular sessions. This serves to provide an additional layer of support to the mentee, as well as inform the site coordinator if adjustments need to be made to the mentor-mentee pairings. Mentors and mentees may use their discretion to determine how they will facilitate the check-ins.

**College and Career Ready.** This program will also emphasize helping students be college and career ready depending on the path they choose to take beyond high school. To assist with understanding the difference and the requirements to reach their goals, students will visit colleges and job sites. Mentees will visit Nash-Community College in the winter and Pitt Community College in the spring. So that they understand how community college life is different from a university, mentees will visit a university in mid-Fall during a homecoming event and an Open House event during the summer. This will allow the thirty mentees an opportunity to have four vastly different experiences at four different institutions of higher education. In addition to the college experience, mentees will also have exposure to their chosen career or job. Students will spend at least one day quarterly at their mentor's job site. These days may be scheduled around days students have off from school such as teacher workdays or holidays. Mentors will provide mentees paid internship opportunities when mentees reach the legal age to obtain a workers permit. The paid internship will provide mentees with an opportunity to utilize the skills they will learn in the Financial Literacy Workshop.



#### **IV. Evaluation Design and Methods**

To ensure that there is proper oversight of the program, the site coordinator will be IRB certified. Prior to the first mentor-mentee meeting, an online career cluster interest survey will be administered to the 25-30 mentee participants to determine the number of mentors needed. The results will be used to direct participants toward a field appropriate for their interests and disposition, as well as to recruit mentors for the program. The data collector will collect and record the survey results before sharing the results with the Advisory Committee. The Committee will use the information to recruit mentors in the specific career fields. In addition, mentees will complete a paper pencil survey with five questions regarding mentee hobbies, academic habits, goals, concerns, as well as birthday and other special occasions to be given to mentors at the initial meeting. Mentors will also complete an interest inventory at the mentor orientation that will be shared with the mentee prior to the initial meeting so the mentee with an opportunity to become familiar with their mentee to minimize stress caused by meeting a stranger.

All participants will complete a paper and pencil evaluation of each session with 5 questions regarding their initial understanding of the topic, what their understanding is after the session, the most important piece of information learned, how the information will be used for self-improvement, and what could strengthen the presentation. Additionally, participants may make suggestions for future topics or topics requiring more depth. The data generated will be shared with the presenter for the topic being evaluated, the presenter for the next month's topic, and the Advisory Committee to be used for developing and improving subsequent sessions. This will allow for continued improvement of the workshops.

Mentors and mentees will complete a short Google survey at the conclusion of the initial meeting regarding their impression of their mentor or mentee. The survey will be completed again at three, six, and nine months. This information will provide information about how the relationship is developing. If progress is not being made within three months, the site coordinator may intervene early enough in the program to either offer suggestions as to how to improve the relationship or find a more suitable pairing. If a survey indicates issues in month six or nine when no problems were evident before, the site coordinator may use this information to investigate whether there are issues may have potential to derail progress being made by the mentee.

The representative from each school on the Advisory Committee will present the data collector with quantitative school data monthly on each mentee to include attendance, EOG scores, classroom performance, and behavior. The data collector will create reports for the site coordinator and the Advisory Committee. The data will be analyzed to show possible trends, as well as to indicate the effectiveness of the program for the participants. Negative changes to data for specific mentees will alert the site coordinator to potential problems leading to early intervention to avoid setbacks.

A focus group of participants will be held three months into the program to determine how well they believe the program is progressing. Participants will share what they perceive to be strengths and weaknesses. Subsequent focus groups will be held at six months and at the end of the first year to collect qualitative data on participants' impressions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The focus groups will be lead by the site coordinator. The data will be shared with the Advisory Committee for use in adjusting the program to meet the needs of the participants.

## **V. Sustainability Plan**

The On the Right Track Program is unique because it will not be reliant on increasing amounts of funding to support increased costs of living each year. Additional students will not be added to the program until year five when the current 7<sup>th</sup> grade students will be juniors in high school. The current 7<sup>th</sup> grade students will be juniors in five years. The expectation is that they will return to the program in year five when they are juniors to serve as peer mentors. This will offer students another layer of support to assist with their continued growth and development. Understanding that five years is a long commitment for mentors, additional mentors in the chosen jobs and career fields will be recruited at the beginning of year two based on need. There may be a time when a mentee will have two mentors to ease the transition from one mentor to another. This will give the mentee an opportunity to get acquainted with the new mentor while not feeling abandoned by the original mentor.

In subsequent years, additional funds will be needed for acquisition of t-shirts to serve as uniforms, food expenses, and annual college and university trips. To cover these expenses, the site coordinator will be charged with securing sponsorships from local businesses and faith-based organizations, as well as organizing fundraisers. Since many of the mentees attend Word Tabernacle Church, the church has agreed to allow for the use of their charter bus at no cost to the program when participants need transportation for field trips.

To continue with qualified, well-trained staff, upperclassmen from the local colleges studying to be educators will be recruited to serve a one year internship. This will provide the college student with an opportunity to work with the most at risk students in the Nash-Rocky Mount area while giving back to the community.

This initial grant will serve as a pilot for future programs designed for mentoring children of incarcerated parents. As the program increases in stability, it will be expanded to other areas in the Nash-Rocky Mount Public Schools district. Areas in Nash County will be added based on the demographics and rates of crime in the areas. With the increase in the number of programs, there will be opportunities for additional partnerships and local funding support. This will allow greater opportunities for more children. In providing these opportunities, juvenile delinquency will decrease, academic achievement will increase, and poverty will decrease.

**Appendix A.**

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