Cobb schools mentoring program enters its third year, builds bonds

by Philip Clements
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MARIETTA — Kincaid Elementary fifth-grader Tyrick Johnson is always excited when school lets out Friday afternoons because that’s when he gets to hang out with his mentor, Jared Minga.

Minga, 30, is a mentor through Cobb Mentoring Matters, the district’s school-based mentoring program.

He lives in Atlanta and works at Aaron’s Inc. Marietta. As soon as he gets off work each week, he goes to see Kincaid.

Johnson said at the start of each session, they’ll talk for a while about what each of them have been up to that week.

“Then we go outside and play football,” Johnson said, noting he is better than Minga at the sport.

As for other things they both enjoy, Johnson turned to Minga and asked him if he likes onion rings.

“I do like onion rings,” Minga said with a laugh. “We share onion rings in common.”

Minga said this kind of playful back-and-forth is typical of their afternoons together. He said he first found out about the program after seeing a poster in the break room at work a few months ago. He said he is glad he volunteered because it’s fulfilling to be a mentor.

“For me, every time I come in here and I see him, I smile,” Minga said. “Just knowing that you’re able to be some kind of influence. He’s got good energy, he’s a positive guy. He’s got a passion to prove himself as a person, so just being able to be a part of his world, it’s great.”

Tyrick said his favorite thing about having a mentor is having someone to share with and get advice.

“You can talk about what’s bothering you,” he said. “If a kid needs a mentor, they should get one.”

COBB MENTORING MATTERS

Maryellen Gomes is the mentor coordinator for the Cobb County School District and oversees Cobb Mentoring Matters.
When she started the program in 2011, she said there really wasn’t anything similar in place.

“The whole premise was to be able to have an organically-grown, school-based mentoring program from within the district,” Gomes said. “Mentoring programs have been involved with school districts forever. Third-party mentoring programs, churches, civic groups, individuals who want to come into schools and mentor.”

What makes Cobb Mentoring Matters unique, Gomes said, is it is run by the school district itself, not a third-party organization.

She said mentoring is a tried and true way of providing intervention and guidance to children who are in need of a role model, or even just a friend.

“We’ve all been mentored at some point by someone,” Gomes said. “I don’t care how old you are, there’s always somebody that you can relate to that you know has impacted your life, whether it was for a brief period of time or sustained as you were going through your teens.”

She said sometimes children go through a tough time and might not be able to talk to their friends, family or teachers about it, but still need someone to help.

“Make no mistake — the kids a lot of our mentors are matched with have a lot of things going on,” Gomes said. “And so a mentor can really help. … That person is just there for that student. It’s a phenomenal relationship that works.”

Johnson, for instance, is one of 10 children and helps take care of his grandmother, Minga said, something that isn’t always easy for an 11-year-old.

Gomes said she used her background and experience from Big Brothers, Big Sisters, a national volunteer-based mentoring program, to build Cobb Mentoring Matters.

“They really gave me my sea legs in terms of understanding the best practices of mentoring,” she said. “So I knew that, moving forward, these were going to be our guiding principles — recruitment, training, orientation, monitoring, evaluation — and that’s how we set this up.”

Gomes said the program is now in its third year and has had more than 300 mentors volunteer since 2011. She said, as the director, she oversees all 114 schools in the Cobb district with almost 112,000 students.

There are about 75 matches in the county right now, she said, with about 84 students being mentored. And Gomes said the program is only growing.

For instance, Kincaid counselor Callie Binzer said last year there was one mentor at the school and this year there are four.

“That student really gained a lot emotionally, socially and academically,” Binzer said. “It’s been wonderful … it’s a win-win situation.”
Gomes said mentors range from 18 to 85 years old and are able to choose the school where they want to volunteer.

There are even school district employees who are mentors, she added.

“We ask our mentors to commit to one school year, from August until May, and we ask them to commit to one hour a week,” she said.

There is a fairly rigorous vetting process, Gomes said, because the mentors will be entering schools and working directly with children.

Once a prospective mentor goes to the website — www.cobbmentoringmatters.org — and provides contact information, they will receive an email containing the application within about 24 hours, Gomes said.

“They may live in south Cobb but they work over near Barrett Parkway. I can find a school — elementary, middle or high school — within two miles of where you live, work or play. So that really is a strong selling point to volunteer because we want to make it easy. We want to make it fun.”

Mentors must attend an orientation during which they learn the ins and outs of mentoring, from the code of conduct to how to deal with certain situations, such as a death in the family or if a child becomes aggressive. After the orientation, Gomes said mentors are sent to be fingerprinted and get a district badge.

She said she also requires mentors to track and self-evaluate their time as volunteers.

“Every month, once you’re matched, I will send you a survey link where you will tell me how many days you went that month, what you did with your mentee, what kind of issues may have come up, things of that nature,” Gomes said.

She said Cobb Mentoring Matters relies heavily on school counselors to determine which students are in need of a mentor. So, when a mentor is vetted and picks the school they want to volunteer at, Gomes contacts that school’s counselor and describes the mentor to the counselor to find the best match at that school.

“Something that will spark a trigger for them to identify a student (the mentor) can be matched with,” Gomes said, adding the parents or legal guardians are also involved in the process. “We do this as a team.”

She’ll then share the match with the mentor and allow them to make their decision and she makes sure to provide as much mentor support as possible.
“We’re not just going to throw you into a school,” she said. “You will have myself as your first point of contact. You will know who the school counselor is (or) the teacher.”

Minga said the support system is great and Gomes is always checking in to see if there’s anything she can do to help.

“When I first came here, I just saw how they treat (Johnson), how everybody’s so positive about him and they all want to see everything go well for him,” he said. “He’s got a good team around him and it’s a good program.”

For those who are interested in being a mentor, visit www.cobbmentoringmatters.org and click “I’d like to be a mentor” on the homepage.

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