



The Law
School Mentoring
Program



True education seeks to make
men and women not
only good mathematicians,
proficient linguists,
profound scientists, or brilliant
literary lights, but also
honest men with virtue, temper-
ance, and brotherly love.

PRESIDENT DAVID O. MCKAY



For most of the week, the classrooms at the J. Reuben Clark Law School are filled with talk about *breach of fiduciary duty*, *exceptions to the hearsay rule*, and *copyright infringement*. For one hour each week, though, the law takes a backseat to sixth-grade math story problems, touch-football games, and discussion of a 12-year-old's worries and dreams.

BY EDWARD L. CARTER

PHOTOS BY

BRADLEY SLADE

For many BYU law students, the most fulfilling hour of the week does not involve studying, working on a co-curricular journal, or interviewing for a job, but mentoring an elementary school student in the JRC Law School's sixth-grade mentoring program.

"I was amazed at how it helped me have a better perspective on life and not just focus on myself," said Jeremy Erickson, who enjoyed the mentoring experience so much as a second-year law student that he became student director during his third year. "You feel like you're making a difference in someone's life."

The sixth graders from Provo's Sunset View Elementary School also enjoy the one-on-one time with their mentors each week. In fact, Professor Brett Scharffs launched the mentoring program several years ago with the aim of instilling confidence in the preteens.

Helen Alexander, mentoring coordinator for Provo School District, tells law students, "You don't take the place of their parents. You don't take the place of their teachers. But you are there for them. You care about them."

A Place Where Learning and Friendship Thrive

As the group of mostly first-year law students gather in the moot court room, nervous chatter fills the air. The mounting anticipation is palpable as students wonder how they will perform in this new challenge. A law professor takes his place in front of the group and begins to speak.

The first day of Civil Procedure? In this case, no. Instead, this is the scene just before noon on the first Tuesday of October. Law students who only two months earlier had

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never briefed a case already are acting on their desire to give something back to the community.

Although it only requires one hour per week, the mentoring program represents a small miracle among law students under heavy pressure to perform well on exams. In fact, the belief that law students were too preoccupied with their studies to dedicate time to the mentoring program nearly squelched the program before it ever got off the ground.

"A lot of people thought law students would be too busy and would flake out—and that would just give these kids another adult in their life who failed them," Erickson said. "But that hasn't been the case."

Scharffs finds law students telling him the mentoring hour is the highlight of their day—even better than Scharffs' own class. The professor does not mind though. "I believe that the lawyers who are most dissatisfied with the practice of law are probably those who are not making pro bono and public service work a regular part of their diet of legal work," Scharffs said when asked about the mentoring program on KBYU's "Eye on the Y." "My hope for the law students is that they will catch a vision of public service that will enrich their lives for years to come."



On the first mentoring day of fall semester, law students tend to sit together on one side of the moot court room while sixth graders bunch up on the other side. It is difficult to tell which group of students is more apprehensive. One thing is clear, however: students in both groups are anxious to meet a new friend.

Within minutes, Scharffs, Erickson, and Alexander are pairing up the two sets of students. Instantly, worries are calmed and friendships are born.

"It was fun to see my student each Tuesday," said Emily Kunz, who mentored as a first-year law student in 2000–2001. "She was excited to tell me stories that happened to her during the week."

Many of the pairs remain in the moot court room while completing assignments made by sixth-grade teachers. Sometimes,

the algebra problems assigned to the sixth graders challenge the law students more than all but the most brutal application of the Socratic method in contracts.

But there is one significant difference between contracts and algebra: algebra—at least as completed by a law student and a sixth grader—is as much about friendship as it is about rules.

Another thing: At the end of every algebra session is at least 10 minutes of Foosball, Frisbee, touch football, or just shooting the breeze. Every once in a while, there's a Halloween costume parade or a pizza party.

"It was so much more relaxing than legal studies," Kunz said.

A Mutually Beneficial Program

The most telling characteristic of the J. Reuben Clark Law School's sixth-grade mentoring program is that both the elementary school students and the law students think they benefit most.

"It's great for both sides," said Ron Firmage, a sixth-grade teacher at Sunset View who immediately embraced the mentoring idea once Scharffs proposed it. "The law students love it, and it's great for my kids to have a buddy in college. Some of the kids don't (otherwise) have much exposure to college."

Firmage believes the sixth graders who benefit most are those whose parents are blue-collar workers, because the mentoring program gets the youngsters thinking about education after high school. He smiles when he hears students who probably never had the intention of attending college now talk about what they would like to study.

That payoff, in his mind, is more than enough to qualify the program as a success. It's not always easy, though. There are buses to schedule, lesson plans to juggle, and concerned parents to reassure.

Some families who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints initially expressed concern that their children might feel uncomfortable at BYU, but that has not proven to be the case. "They can stay back at the school if they choose to," Firmage said. "But the other kids are so excited and talk about the program so much all week that those who don't go feel left out."

On one Tuesday late in fall semester 2001, the sixth graders and their mentors celebrated their hard work throughout the semester with pizza and soda pop. Having completed most of their schoolwork, the pairs of students fanned out. While some played Foosball in the Student Bar Association room, others joined in a game of hide-and-seek. Everyone had a friend.

"The thing I've enjoyed the most is remembering what it was like to be a sixth grader," said first-year law student Jason Hadley. "I don't have to think about law. I can just pretend like I'm a sixth grader."

An elementary school student observing the Foosball action agreed that his mentor provides an academic boost and a welcome break from the mundane. "It's fun," he said. "We do math problems and then when we're done sometimes we go to the vending machines."

The Provo School District annually has about 400 mentors, nearly one-fourth of whom are BYU law students. Alexander calculates that the district spends about \$12 per student each year to operate the mentoring program, including providing materials, training, and supervisors. She believes that's a bargain when viewed in light of what the young students get out of the program. Alexander believes the encouragement, friendship, and example of law students pay big dividends.

"The main thing we ask you to do is be role models to these students," Alexander tells law students. "We want you to be their friends. Help them set goals for school. Talk with them about what you have to do financially and academically to get to college. Plant those seeds."

When Scharffs observed a similar program at Georgetown University Law Center before coming to BYU, he noted that it served mostly disadvantaged inner-city students. In Provo the economic and educational opportunities may be more readily available to all students, but the professor knows from his own experience that everyone needs a mentor.

"We're not singling out students because they are especially needy or especially gifted," Scharffs told the KBYU audience. "We are saying to every child, 'You are special.'"

True Learning

All those involved with the program have been amazed at the willingness of busy law students, especially first-years, to volunteer their time. With their days filled with briefing cases, outlining courses, researching, and writing, law students could easily say they simply cannot free up one hour each week for a child they don't even know.

Those who participate, however, say they feel mentoring left them in a much better position than if they had not done it. Securing 90 mentors out of 450 law students—many of whom are precluded from mentoring because of jobs or externships—is a testament not only to the recruiting capabilities of Scharffs and Erickson but also to the spirit of service permeating the Law School.

"From my experience, it was kind of nice to take a break," Erickson said. "It's something that doesn't benefit your grades but it benefits you in other ways." Erickson, like many mentors, has children of his own at home. Still, he wanted to do something for someone outside his own family. He said his wife fully supported his decision to become a mentor. "You've got to have balance in life," he said. "The way I look at it, that means time for yourself, your family, and others. It's a sacrifice, but it pays off."

Scharffs tells worried law students that mentoring will not hurt them academically. If anything, he says, it will help, because it's a stress-reducer.

Kunz agrees. "They're pretty good about cutting back when it gets close to finals, but there were still times I had a paper due and got stressed," Kunz said. "It was good to have that perspective. That's what life will be like as a lawyer—there are conflicting demands, and you have to prioritize."

The law students' influence extends even beyond the sixth graders with whom they associate. Largely based on the example of their law-student mentors, many of the sixth graders choose to serve as mentors for second-grade students at Sunset View.

{ David O. McKay quote: "Why Education?" *Improvement Era*, vol. 70, no. 9 (September 1967), p. 3. }