



The Learning Curve

April '05

Cargill Scholars® is an educational, social and economic-development program for socio-economically disadvantaged children who attend school in Minneapolis or its northern and western suburbs. The program is designed to improve the academic achievement of 50 children who joined the program in the fourth grade (they are now in the seventh grade), with the goal being their successful completion of high school and admission into a post-secondary institution. The Cargill Foundation has committed up to \$5 million over five years to Cargill Scholars.

Mentoring: Why it's part of the program

From the early planning stages, we always knew that Cargill Scholars would incorporate the Big Brothers Big Sisters model of mentoring. The twist is that we draw our mentors almost exclusively from the ranks of Cargill employees.

Here's what previous research tells us about the power of mentoring:

Non-academic mentoring has academic benefits. These include better school attendance, better chance of going on to higher education and better attitudes toward school.

Mentoring helps disadvantaged youth more. It generally has more modest benefits for "average" youth than for those in harder circumstances (such as the low-income families served by Cargill Scholars).

Mentoring works best at home or out in the community. It's often not as effective when the actual mentoring takes place at school.

A good match is important. Big Brothers and Big Sisters who are similar in personality to their Little Brothers and Sisters are more likely to maintain long association, one study found.

Consistency counts more than big ambitions. The same study found that mentors with the highest hopes for influencing their protégé did not always stay with the program long enough to have a real impact. Staying with it mattered more.

That's why it's so encouraging that our Cargill mentors tend to have better staying power than the average rate for Big Brothers Big Sisters. I believe that is because we have a group of mentors with a built-in sense of commonality who want to support a program in which their company has invested.

Toni Green
Senior Program Officer, Cargill Foundation

Pros and cons of recruiting mentors within your own organization

Out of the chute we had 50 students ready to be matched, but we were starting from scratch to find volunteers within Cargill. It was slow going. Parents became concerned that their child was waiting so long for a Big Brother or Big Sister. We asked ourselves whether we should give up on the idea of drawing mentors only from among Cargill employees. While that would have been the easy thing to do, we maintained the conviction that we could indeed find 50 Cargill employees to participate.

It grew harder, not easier, to find a good match when only a few Scholars remained, because potential mentors had fewer students from whom to draw in seeking a good fit. With the last three or four matches, it was like finding a needle in a haystack.

But it did work. With two exceptions due to religious preference and geographical location, all of the Scholars are matched with a Cargill employee as their Big Brother or Big Sister.

Two things helped greatly. First, Greg Page, president and COO of Cargill, is a Big Brother and serves on the board of Big Brothers Big Sisters. He helped recruit Cargill employees for the program. What a difference that made! We now have a small waiting list of employees who want to be matched with a Scholar.

"Many mentors had the good fortune to grow up in a family where money was not an issue, and they had two parents there with them. It can be eye opening to be personally connected like this to a household that struggles with very little income."

*Sam Payne
Cargill Scholars program coach*



Chioma, a Cargill Scholar, with Angela, her Big Sister

Second, the program allows two mentors to team up with one Little Brother. That opened the door for some Cargill employees who wanted to help, but maybe did not feel ready to be the sole mentor for a Cargill Scholar. We have a few married couples doing this together and a few pairs of adults who have simply teamed up to mentor a Cargill Scholar.

“Some of our matches are turning into long-term friendships. As the youth are turning 13 and 14, they understand more about the dynamics of friendship. They’re starting to put more into the friendship.”

- Alicia Schwarz

Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Greater Twin Cities

More challenges

- Some of the families, especially immigrant families, had no prior experience with the mentoring idea. They felt it implied that they weren’t doing a good job as parents — why else would we bring a stranger into their child’s life? When Cargill Scholars staff explained the idea and asked them to trust that this would be good for their child, they sometimes went along with a watchful eye or sent along a sibling.
- The Scholars have a very full schedule — tutoring, music lessons and other extracurricular activities. Their Cargill mentors also have a challenging work schedule, often including travel. In some ways this has actually helped, as the mentors understand how to work around tight schedules.
- Siblings feel left out. This is natural any time one child in a family participates in something special, so it’s a challenge for any program like Cargill Scholars. Since Big Brothers Big Sisters is mostly about friendship and enjoyment, this is one of the things that siblings wish they had too.
- The Cargill Scholars version of Big Brothers Big Sisters adds new wrinkles, since it’s a bit different from the usual model. The Cargill Scholars staff members know these students and families very well, so they have to take extra care to respect confidentiality when the Bigs want to learn more about their Little’s situation.

“His Big Brother has been really good for him. With him, he can do stuff that I wish I could help him do, but I don’t have the time to do it.”

“I had my daughter when I was 15, so I didn’t go to college. It’s good for her to see a different perspective [with her Big Sister].”

- Cargill Scholars parents



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For more information about
Cargill Scholars, visit
www.cargill.com.

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briefing, or to subscribe or
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952-742-6247.

Research reports on Cargill
Scholars are available at
www.wilderresearch.org.

What parents, mentors and Scholars are saying

In the evaluation study of Cargill Scholars, 84 percent of parents and 71 percent of Scholars say the mentor has made a difference in the Scholar's life, including new experiences, positive role models, a better outlook on school and life, having an additional caring adult to talk with, and simply having fun together.

The mentors also say that they gain from their experience, including learning about other cultures, the challenges facing youth and families, the value of providing mentoring, and the enjoyment of getting to know their Little Brother or Little Sister.

How has your Big Brother or Big Sister made a difference in your life?

- By taking me to places and showing me new things.
- She encourages me. She tells me, "You can do it."
- He makes me think positively.
- He explains things that allow me to understand things in life better.
- She helps me change my attitude and how I act.
- Showed me how to deal with something.
- They help me when times are tough.
- Taught me to listen better and not talk out a lot.

- Wilder Research evaluation survey of Cargill Scholars

Next issue: Listen to the music

Every Cargill Scholar chooses some form of music lessons, because research shows that learning and performing music has a good influence on academic success. We'll talk about the results, both expected and unexpected.