



The Learning Curve

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Cargill Scholars® is an educational, social and economic development program for socioeconomically disadvantaged children who attend school in Minneapolis or its northern or western suburbs. The program is designed to improve the academic achievement of 50 children who joined the program in the fourth grade; they have just completed the sixth grade. The goal is their successful completion of high school and admission into a postsecondary institution. The Cargill Foundation has committed up to \$5 million over five years to Cargill Scholars.

Meet the coaches

Officially their job title is “program manager,” but lately we’ve been calling Sam Payne and Terri O’Donnell the Cargill Scholars coaches. Their role grows more coach-like as the Scholars get older and gain a greater voice in their own education and activities.

What do the coaches do? On paper, the job description sounds straightforward:

- Serve as the main point of contact for students, parents, teachers, and partner organizations.
- Develop individual learning plans for each scholar at the beginning of the year and follow up throughout the year.
- Coordinate with students, parents, and teachers to arrange all the different aspects of the program (tutoring, music lessons, other activities and events, teacher meetings, and more).
- Visit the student and teacher at school, ideally every two weeks, for a progress check.
- Get involved if the student is having any sort of difficulties at school.
- Attend athletic games, music concerts, and other activities to show support for the Scholars’ efforts and achievements.

In reality, the coaches’ job is more or less “whatever it takes” to remove barriers so the kids can succeed. I have watched them fretting over a student who is stuck in a rut, asking themselves “What else can I do? What can I try?” I have heard them agonize over whether to make an exception for a student who turned over a new leaf mid-year but did not earn enough points for the end-of-year trip. I know they sometimes take evening and weekend calls from Scholars who are going through a tough time. They’ve conjured up eyeglasses, they’ve driven 30 miles one way when a student changed schools, and they’ve also had to say the difficult word “no” to disappointed students and families.

Read on to learn more of the achievements and challenges of the Cargill Scholars coaches.

Toni Green
Senior Program Officer, Cargill Foundation



"A proud moment for me is seeing a kid who was really struggling at first, and then later I can go to that student and say, 'Now you are an honor roll student. All that hard work paid off.'"

Sam Payne

Cargill Scholars coach



"The number one lesson for me has been this: Don't give up. All of a sudden, they get it. And then they start to soar. For some kids it happens very quickly. For others it takes time. But don't ever give up."

Terri O'Donnell

Cargill Scholars coach

Twenty-five to one

When Cargill Scholars began, we set our sights on 50 kids because we felt that 25 was a challenging but manageable number of Scholars for each of the coaches, given the tasks we were asking them to accomplish. We understood some of the challenges facing families who live in or near poverty – frequent moves, transportation needs, holding things together with very limited resources. In addition, most of the parents in the Cargill Scholars program are single mothers with more than one child. These parents are stretched, and being involved in Cargill Scholars is another stretch, no matter how much they welcome the opportunity.

"It's a very fine line," Terri said recently. "We are not their parents, but we are very involved in their lives, especially their schooling. We have wonderful parents in the program, but sometimes they are dealing with a lot. Our job is to constantly be a supportive advocate for the student's success."

Sam added, "We have had to learn what is considered a respectful way to work with each family, within each of the cultures represented. We've developed a good level of trust, but it took some time."

"How has Sam or Terri helped you this year?"

A few of the Scholars' answers from the latest evaluation survey:

- Making sure I turn in my homework on time.
- Helping me learn to multiply – that was one of my goals.
- Helping me do better at reading out loud in class.
- Coaching me to raise my hand in class more, meet new people.
- Pushing me to get good grades.
- Helping me be a better person by helping me with my goals.
- Checking in to see how I was doing.
- Listening and explaining when I didn't understand.
- Helping when times were tough.
- Teaching me to be a more responsible person.
- Taking me someplace I haven't been before.

The unexpected

The program coaches have grappled with some hard decisions and personal challenges that the program model did not anticipate, such as:

Instant expertise, just add water

In a group of 50 students, new issues come up constantly. The coaches have had to quickly learn the basics from many different fields – assessing students’ abilities and potential, emotional development, mental health issues, learning disabilities, and family dynamics.

The extra mile

Literally how far should the coaches go to assist a Scholar? Is it feasible to drive an hour for each school visit if a student changes schools?

Where to draw the line

Initially, the boundaries were very strict. We had guidelines and we followed them. A few years later, we’ve learned some things and we’ve also spent more time with the Scholars and families. The tendency is to use more discretion, make more exceptions. Where is the right balance between “whatever it takes” and being true to the original design and intent of the program?

Second chances

Should there be a probationary period, and if so, how long and for what causes? Why might a Scholar leave the program, and what protocol would we follow? What if the reasons rest more with the parent than the child?

Life changes

What happens, for example, if the family’s economic situation improves and they no longer meet the low-income criterion for becoming a Cargill Scholar?

The checkbook

The coaches manage each child’s individual spending account to pay for lessons, activities, transportation, or necessities like eyeglasses. Which expenses are appropriate and which are not?



“I’ve been impressed with the ‘life organizing’ skills that Sam and Terri help the kids develop. There is a certain discipline to be learned in day-to-day life, in their studies and commitments and activities. It’s a skill that will serve them well, all their lives.”

Dan Haugen
executive director of
Neighborhood Involvement
Program (community agency
that manages operations for
Cargill Scholars)



“Renee is the glue that holds things together. We didn’t realize how central her role would be and how much contact she would have with the students and families. She’s a strong positive influence, and her coordination is indispensable.”

Dan Haugen, speaking
about program assistant
Renee Richie

What parents and teachers say

In the most recent Wilder Research Center evaluation report:

Parents voiced strong confidence in the coaches' cultural competence – their ability to relate to the family's cultural background, their awareness of cultural values, and their knowledge about specific cultural resources and issues.

Parents also highly rated the ease of arranging meetings with coaches, the extent to which parents have a voice in selecting activities for their child, and the amount of information parents receive from program staff.

The teacher survey reflected a positive relationship with program coaches, including frequent communication.

Tough questions

Cargill Scholars leadership and program partners have been mulling over some big questions lately, such as:

Would we still start with students who are in the lowest 25 percent of their class in reading and math skills? It's a long haul to catch up – not only in academics but in the student's confidence, esteem, and habits, as well as the attitudes of teachers and classmates toward that student.

We chose students whose parents had a supportive attitude toward their children's school success. They wanted them to do well and encouraged them. In retrospect, should we have looked for parents who were already demonstrating active involvement? Without that involvement, much more weight falls on the program coaches to keep the students on track with the activities and commitments that go along with being a Cargill Scholar.

Next issue:

Tutoring - Private tutoring is the most direct way that Cargill Scholars helps students grow academically, and the results have been promising. But there are some real tricks to making it work.



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