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LOCAL PROGRAM GETS RESULTS FOR KIDS IN NEED

Anytown, State—At a time when local schools and communities are coping with high dropout rates, increased youth involvement in gangs, and preteen drug abuse, one Cook County youth program is succeeding in preventing these negative behaviors. An independent study of the Stepping Stones Mentoring Program showed middle school students who participated in the program performed better in school and were less likely to use drugs and alcohol than their peers who weren't involved in formal mentoring relationships.

Stepping Up Together, a 45-page impact study of Stepping Stones's services, has just been released. The one-year study tracked 275 program participants against a control group of non-mentored youth. It found that pairing at-risk youth with caring adult mentors and providing meaningful educational, recreational, and developmental activities yielded notable benefits:

- 75% of the young participants improved their grades in key subjects
- Unexcused absences from school declined by 40% for mentored youth
- 85% of the mentees reported feeling more confident about school
- 65% reported improved relations with their families and 55% said they improved peer relationships
- 83% of the parents of participating youth felt that the program had improved their child's self-esteem, attitudes, and relationships
- Alcohol and substance abuse decreased by 30% in mentored youth

"These are very encouraging numbers," says Program Director Dennis Wakeland. "We knew that we were reaching these kids, but now we can move forward with expanding the program and building on our results. Being able to show your impact is key for any youth-serving agency."

The study, conducted by graduate students at Jackson University, also examined what factors were responsible for the positive results. Among the keys to success: matches that lasted an average of 17 months; extensive pre-match training and preparation for all volunteers, youth, and parents; and the availability of tutoring services through a partnership with two afterschool programs at the school sites.

"The tutors played a critical piece in the educational results," says Wakeland. "They took care of much of the homework help and classroom content. This freed our mentors to concentrate on building their relationships with the youth so they could begin to address the attitudes and non-school factors that lead to academic success or failure. Tutoring and mentoring is a great combination."

Stepping Stones is a collaboration between Cook County Youth Services and the Cook County School District. It was founded in 1998 by two AmeriCorps members who added mentoring to the afterschool services at Thomas Jefferson Middle School. A 2004 U.S. Department of Education grant provided funding to increase services at Jefferson while also expanding the program to Bertrand Russell Middle School.

The mentoring activities alternate between meetings at the school sites and field trips where participants can explore additional recreational and youth development activities in the community. All Stepping Stones youngsters and mentors go on additional group outings once a quarter. The matches—between one adult and one child—last at least a full calendar year. Community-based meetings are held during the summer months when school facilities are closed.

For more information on the Stepping Stones program and a link to the evaluation study, visit www.steppingstonementors.com.