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Essay: National Mentoring Month recognizes the importance of helping our youth

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January traditionally is designated as National Mentoring Month, a time when we raise public awareness of the long-lasting benefits of connecting children to caring adult mentors who offer advice, companionship, and a chance for a brighter future.

This January, following nearly a year of COVID fatigue, it is even more important that we address the evolving needs of the millions of school children across the country who have been adversely affected by stay-at-home learning and physical isolation from teachers and classmates.

During these challenging times, mentoring can significantly help children boost their self-esteem and improve their social interactions with their peers as well as with adults. Whether through school-sponsored mentoring programs or programs organized by non-profit groups, the mentoring experience offers children hope for success and a better life.

Countless studies over the years have pointed to the long-term benefits of mentoring. Indeed, the presence of a mentor in a child's life offers that child a better chance of completing his or her education, pursuing a fulfilling career path, and becoming a responsible adult who ultimately will give back to the community.

The New York State Mentoring Program, chaired by former New York First Lady Matilda R. Cuomo, currently works with hundreds of elementary and middle schools across the state interested in setting up local mentoring sites. The program, originally created by Mrs. Cuomo in the 1980s and reinstated in 2015 by her son, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, matches students with screened and trained volunteer mentors who guide mentees in making positive life choices.

With the onset of COVID, the New York State Mentoring Program established virtual mentoring methods for those schools closed to in-classroom participation. While not as ideal as on-site mentoring, virtual mentoring is a viable option that benefits children with online support and positive interactions with mentors and schoolmates. (For further information on the New York State Mentoring Program, visit [ny.gov/mentoring](https://www.ny.gov/mentoring).)

As noted in the governor's proclamation last year designating January as New York Mentoring Month, "it is fitting that all New Yorkers recognize the importance of mentoring, acknowledge the dedicated individuals who serve as mentors, and encourage more citizens to help build a brighter future for our youth through mentoring."

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