



SPOTLIGHT

2021-2022



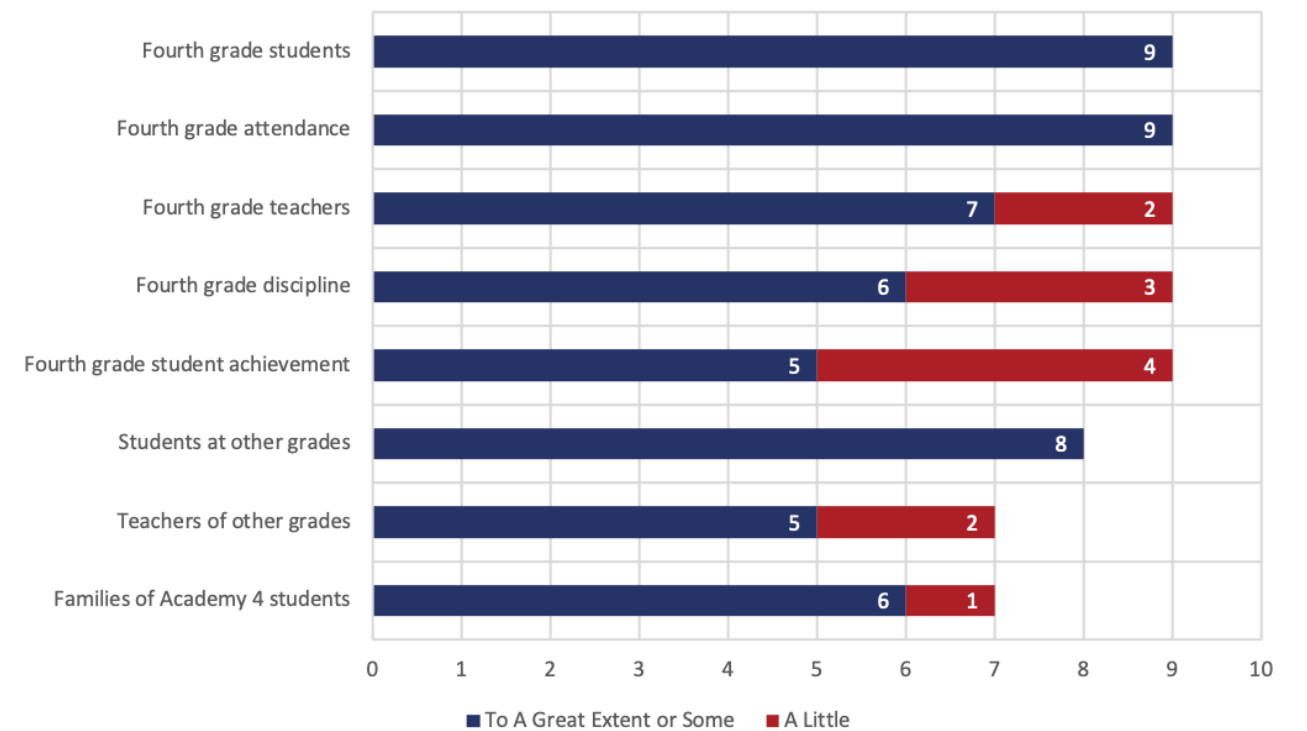
MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

Amazing. Nurturing. Empowering.

These are school principals' descriptions of Academy 4, a program making immediately felt impacts on students for the past ten years. Founded in 2012, Academy 4 partners with local churches to provide a mentor for every fourth grader in participating schools. Targeting economically disadvantaged areas, these heartfelt one-on-one connections with students create positive changes that ripple through the school community. One fourth grader says, "I really felt happy when I met you." Another student notes, "It feels great to know that someone's looking forward to seeing you."

Academy 4 consistently serve schools by creating safe spaces for these connections. "Because the mentors do the work from their heart, they bring with them such positive energy and our students embrace it," comments one school principal. Another principal says, "Academy 4 has had an impact on students, teachers, and administration. It impacts you in so many positive ways, it is truly unbelievable." Teachers also notice the changes the program inspires. "Everybody on campus sees the difference it makes. They see our kids just light up on Academy 4 Fridays." And mentors feel the same way—describing the time spent with their mentees as "phenomenal" and "an amazing opportunity." About her mentee, one mentor said, "It really makes my day seeing her smile as she comes across the cafeteria."

Perceived Impact of Academy 4 on Various Groups and Outcomes



Nine principals responded to a survey question asking the extent to which they perceived Academy 4 has had an impact on various groups and outcomes. Results were overwhelmingly positive. The vast majority of principals reported that Academy 4 has impacted their students, staff, and families as well as the academic achievement, attendance, and discipline of their fourth graders. The graph above shows the number of responses of principals' perceptions of impact per group/outcome.

“Academy 4 has changed the attitude and atmosphere of the whole school.

There’s some hope that there are people here [in the community] that care, and do this for no other reason other than because they care for the kids.”

–M.L. Phillips Principal

A CASE STUDY IN AGILITY & PURPOSE

In 2021-22, Academy 4 stretched and broadened their scope of support to serve partner schools however possible. Mentors and staff stepped up to new challenges, whether it be donating technology supplies for virtual learning or contributing additional volunteers for a school-wide event. In this past year, “the Academy 4 partnership went above and beyond and began working with the whole school,” says one principal, “It brought the community together.”

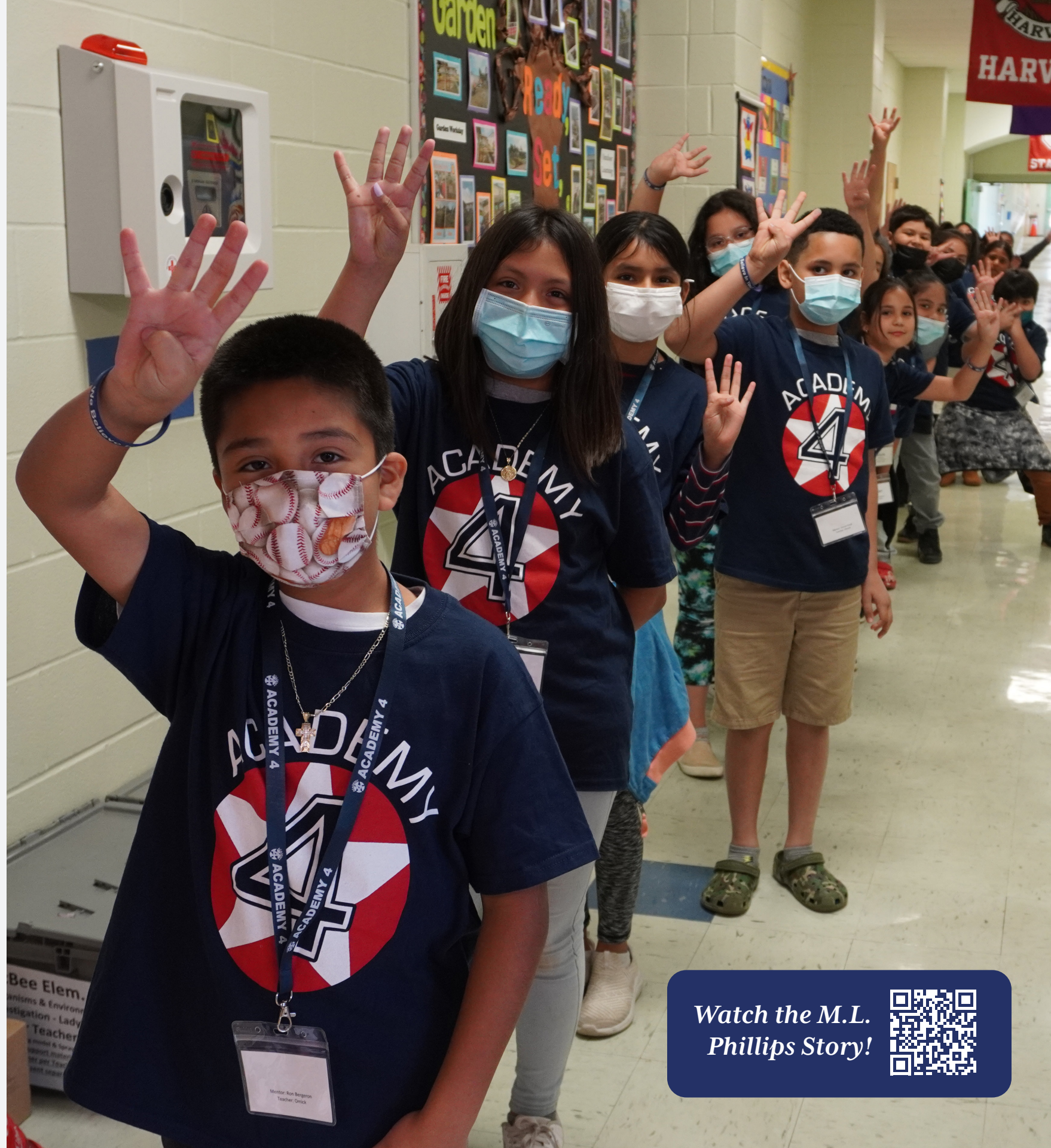
The example from this past year that best captures Academy 4’s nimbleness and dedication to purpose is a partnership which began well after the school year was under way and blossomed into a full-scale implementation. It began in October of 2021, when the administration from M.L. Phillips, a school in Fort Worth, reached out because they were having behavioral difficulties with their fourth grade students. School personnel described these difficulties:

“The kids are having trouble with any kind of authority. They get irritated with each other much easier than they used to. They’re really trying to control each other all of the time, which seems to be a result of everything for them being out of control these past few years during the pandemic. Coming back to the classroom, adjusting to rules and structure has been a challenge. Many of them don’t know how to express themselves in appropriate ways and will express their emotions through violence and withdrawing.”

Academy 4 had never received this type of call for their program after the school year had started. Thanks to the quick response of two church partners and a corporate partner, along with generous donors, Academy 4 was able to recruit enough volunteer mentors for all of the school’s 65 fourth graders by the end of November. They hosted the first orientation day for the students on campus in November, and had mentors and fourth graders meeting in-person in December.

Although M.L. Phillip’s program year was shortened, the impact was swift. In the semester after the Academy 4 program launched, the number of discipline issues decreased by 82%. Fourth graders also attended school more regularly. One M.L. Phillips teacher said, “The first time I saw them sitting there across from their mentors I saw smiles literally for the first time on some of these kids’ faces.”

The M.L. Phillips principal said, “bringing in Academy 4 helped alleviate some of that stress on our teachers. They all care for their students and want them to succeed.” Another teacher noted that, “Academy 4 has changed the attitude and atmosphere of the whole school. There’s some hope that there are people here [in the community] that care, and do this for no other reason other than because they care for the kids.”



Watch the M.L.
Phillips Story!





LEADING THROUGH LISTENING

The Academy 4 program works because it is grounded in listening throughout—listening to the needs of schools, teachers, mentors, and students. Teachers and school leaders report that a consistently proactive approach, willingness to tailor the program to specific school needs, clear communication, and thoughtful preparation make participation in the program effortless for those involved.

Nowhere are the ramifications of deep listening clearer than in building the one-to-one, mentor-to-mentee relationships. Academy 4 mentors lead and teach by example through active, attentive listening. Students feel safe and their stories heard. One fourth grader writes to his mentor, “I hope

to see you again and have more fun together. I hope we can talk, draw, and learn more. You are the best mentor ever. I couldn’t have a better mentor than you. I have a lot more stories to tell.” Another says, “My favorite memory with Academy 4 was first meeting my mentor. I really love Academy 4 because I have someone to talk to.”



Furthermore, learning how to listen to others as well was not lost on this fourth grade student who writes, “I love my mentor because I learn stuff like listening and respect and example. And I love spending time with my mentor.” Other students express gratitude that their mentors listen to them, helping them feel comfortable sharing things about themselves they might not ordinarily share.

Teachers also notice students relaxing and opening up. One teacher says, “A lot of them started to let down their guards and feel really relaxed and it was nice to see that the kids had an adult that they didn’t have to worry about doing homework for or answering to in any way except for this was a person they could talk to that was an adult.”

One school principal described how one student’s deep connection with his mentor enabled him to confide in the mentor about a serious home situation. Because the student felt empowered by his mentor to disclose the situation, school personnel were able to help the student. She expressed deep gratitude to Academy 4 mentors for their involvement.

“I love my mentor because she understands me. I will always remember my mentor because she makes me feel special and she makes me feel safe and loved.”

–Fourth Grader

“The reason I love my mentor is because she makes good eye-contact and I can speak from the heart. She always listens to what I’m saying and she makes good eye-contact.”

–Fourth Grader

Watch
Student
Testimonials!



FORMING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

Deep listening builds bonds that stay with individuals. A fourth grade student writes to his mentor, “You are so kind to me. You help me get things right. You really get me.”

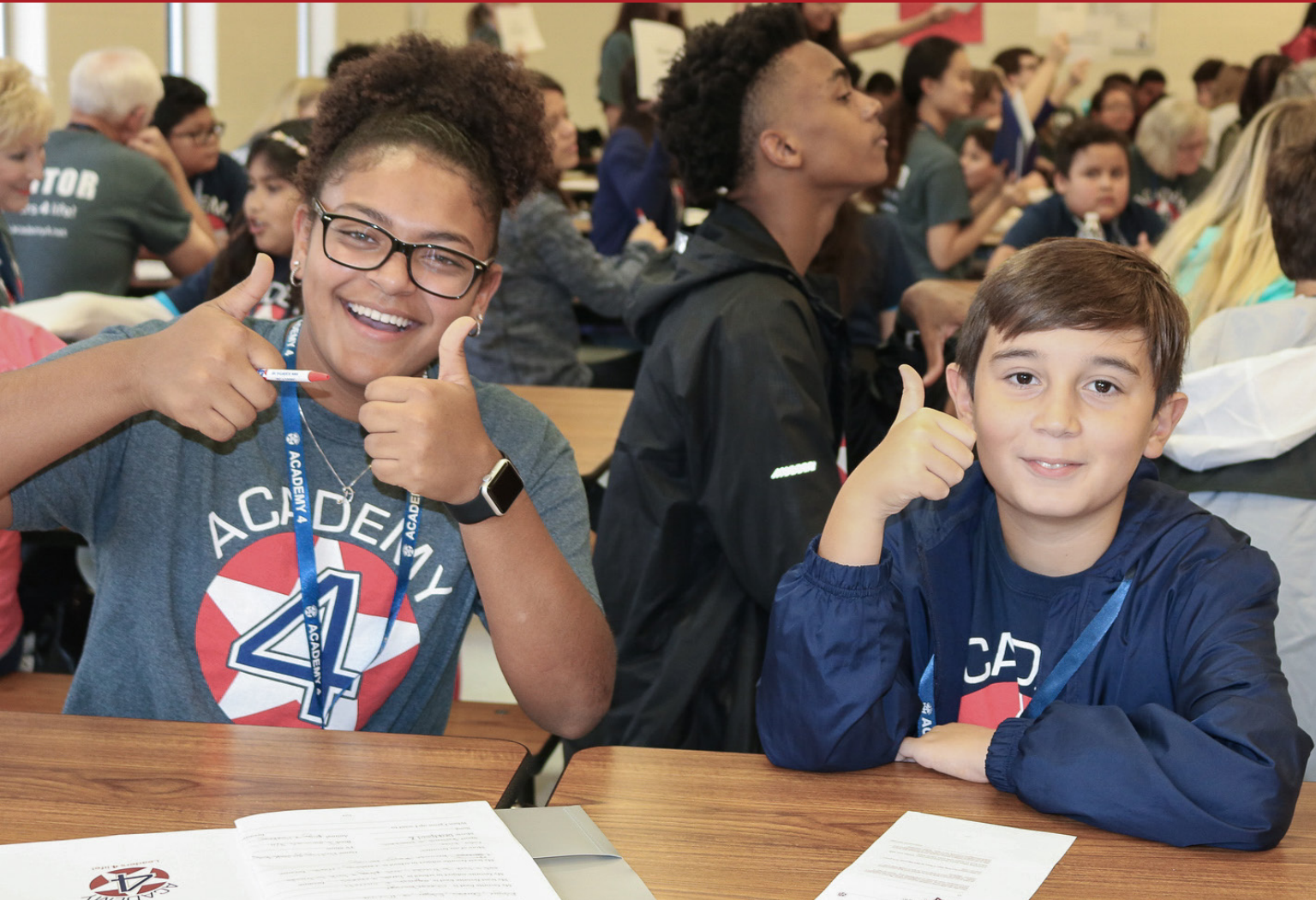
Indeed, research indicates that young people need a strong web of healthy adult relationships in their lives to enable them to grow, learn, and thrive.^{1,2} In fact, children who experience strong developmental relationships are more likely to show signs of positive development in areas like:

- Academic motivation;³
- Social-emotional growth and learning;⁴ and
- Personal responsibility.⁵

Both mentees and mentors express positive perceptions of their relationship across the five domains of the Search Institute’s developmental relationship framework: Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, and Expand Possibilities (see www.searchinstitute.org for details).

Program stakeholders report clear benefits to students in developing relationships with adults who may be from a different culture or community. They felt that these opportunities helped students gain the confidence to explore other potential relationships outside of their typical social circles.

¹Shonkoff, J., Levitt, P., Bunge, S., Cameron, J., Duncan, G., Fisher, P., & Fox, N. (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience. pdf. *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child*.
²National Research Council. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. National Academies Press.
³Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Allen, J. P. (2012). Teacher-student relationships and engagement: Conceptualizing, measuring, and improving the capacity of classroom interactions. In *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 365-386). Springer, Boston, MA.
⁴Jones, S. M., & Bouffard, S. M. (2012). Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: From Programs to Strategies. *Social Policy Report*. Volume 26, Number 4. Society for Research in Child Development.
⁵Miller, D. (1980). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Bronfenbrenner, U.



“Having community people come in and volunteer of their own time and their own talents lets us know that we’re not alone.”
–Teacher

FORMING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

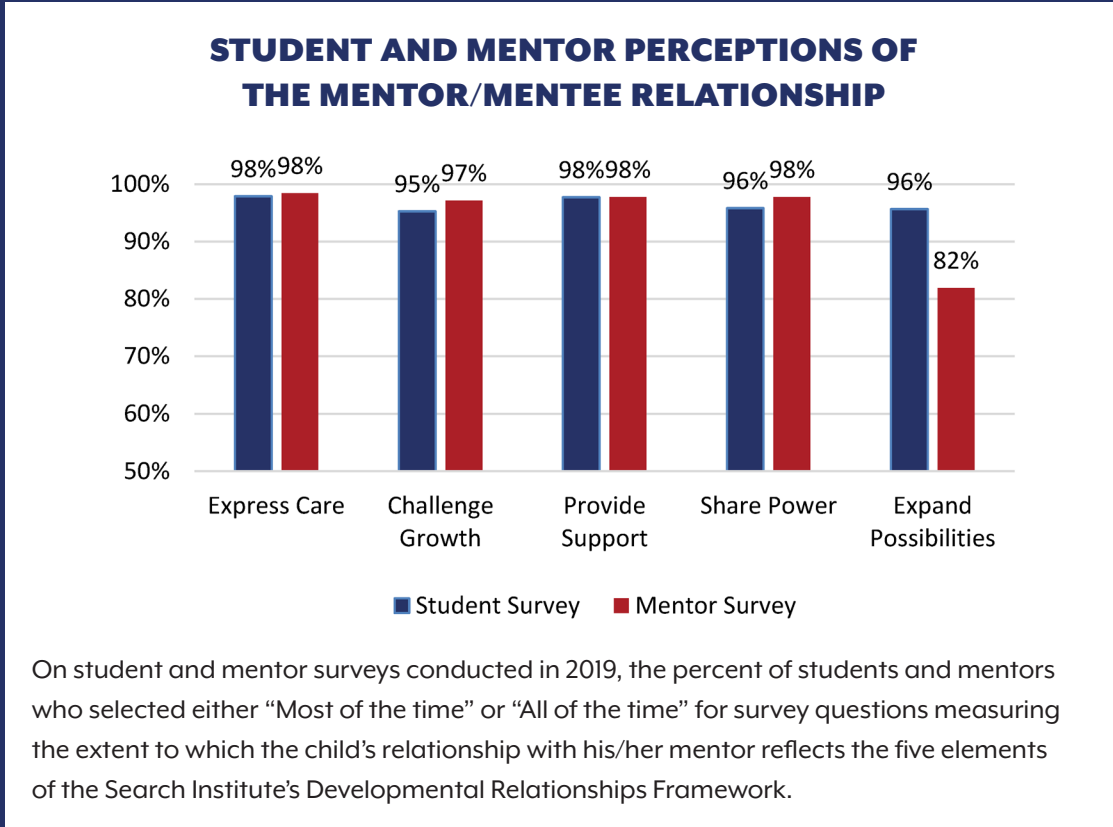
One fourth grade student writes to her mentor, “You are the best person that I know.” Another says, “I love my mentor because she understands me. I will always remember my mentor because she makes me feel special and she makes me feel safe and loved.”

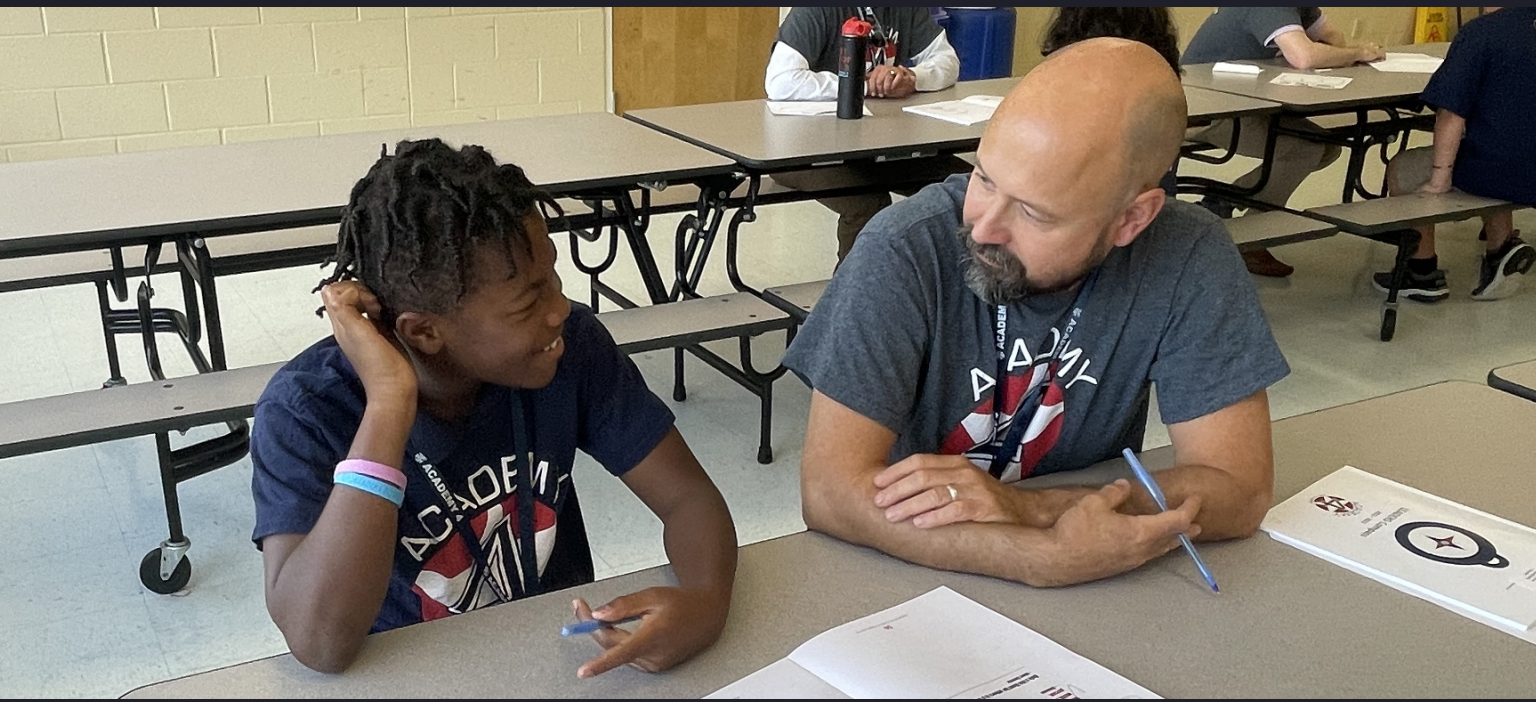
By leveraging the mentoring relationship and focusing on teaching students leadership skills, the program ignites confidence, bolsters self-efficacy, and sparks a desire to grow and serve others. One mentor notes that “in just two short sessions” her mentee opened up and became “attentive and eager to learn.”

For some mentees the impact of having a mentor inspires them to become mentors themselves when they are older through Academy 4’s Full Circle program. One Full Circle Mentor says, “When I first met [my mentee] she was so shy. I couldn’t really speak to her. It was me doing all the talking. Now she loves talking and we love hanging out.” She continues, “I feel like as a mentor it’s impacted my life. It’s been able to give me a bond with someone and it’s made me feel like much more of a leader.”

Because there is that consistent attention and listening, mentees feel close to, and remember, their mentors and the experience stays with them, even when they must say goodbye. One fourth grader says, “When we say our goodbyes and then hug our mentors—It feels like, ‘no, she’s leaving!’—but we’re still hugging each other inside our hearts.”

“I feel like as a mentor it’s impacted my life. It’s been able to give me a bond with someone and it’s made me feel like much more of a leader.”
– Mentor





***“I will remember how they help me
with my struggles.”***

—Fourth Grader

ENCOURAGING POSITIVE CHANGE

Academy 4 builds positive changes in students that impact the whole school community. These changes manifest especially strongly in leadership, social and emotional learning skills, and personal responsibility. Fourth graders writing and speaking about the program all seem to grasp the qualities of leadership and how they too can be leaders for others.

Fourth graders spoke highly of the values they cherished in their mentors, values they wanted to emulate. One mentee said of his mentor, “they can motivate me so I can be a good person.” Another expounded on the qualities of a good person saying of his mentor, “he is honest, kind, grateful, and helpful.” These qualities are key for leadership, according to the fourth graders in the program. “The things I’ve learned from Academy 4 have helped me to be a better leader,” says one mentee, “To show responsibility and care for others.”

Another student reflected on how Academy 4 helped her learn “to encourage one another” and “respect people.” She ties what she learned to specific skills such as making eye contact when listening—“how to look at the people that are talking and wait for your turn.”

Furthermore, one fourth grade mentee learned how to communicate and empathize with others. She says her mentor “helped me be a better leader by encouraging me to express my feelings to others that are down and who need help.”

One mentee noted how Academy 4 helped him develop personal resilience and grit in the face of challenges, stating, “Academy 4 is fun because our mentor helps us with things we’re struggling on and with things we don’t know yet. They help me become a better leader by learning not to give up and keep going. I will remember how they help me with my struggles.”

One mentee says “My mentor helped me grow like a tree.” Another sums up his experience with gratitude, “Thank you for helping me to be a better person!”

Principals, teachers, and mentors notice these positive changes too. One teacher writes, “Their leadership skills have really improved since we just got them (mentors) in August, now in March, they are just becoming better and better leaders, supporting each other, and working well as teammates together, so we’ve really seen a good impact.” A teacher at another Academy 4 school says, “The culture has changed here at M.L. Phillips. I’ve seen a lot of the students try to implement what they’ve learned through Academy 4.”

INSPIRING SERVICE TO OTHERS

The mentor-mentee relationship and focus on leadership skills sparks a desire in students to grow and serve others. Many Academy 4 mentees talk about how important their mentors are to them and why. The positive experiences profoundly affect them. One fourth grader writes to his mentor, “I will still remember you when I grow up. I will be a mentor just like you. I’m hoping I will become one just as I want it to be.”

Some mentees then go on to become part of the Full Circle program and apply to be Full Circle Scholars later in their lives. The Full Circle Program launched in 2019-20, the school year when Academy 4’s first group of fourth grade mentees reached high school and became eligible to serve as mentors themselves. In 2021-22 the Full Circle Program blossomed, with a dozen scholars returning to serve as mentors. “It meant a lot when I was a kid,” says one Full Circle Scholar. He describes wanting to have “an impact on another person the same way it did on me—it means a lot to me.” Another Full Circle Scholar says, “I remember the excitement the most. I feel like it pushed me to become a better person.”

A third Full Circle Scholar echoes this intention: “I felt like I needed to come back to be a mentor because I wanted to build a bond with that child and watch them grow and help them excel in their growth.”

Yet another Full Circle Scholar states, “I wanted to come back to be a mentor because I wanted to make a fourth grader feel the same way I felt.” Describing his mentee this year, he says, “I’ve definitely seen them come out of their shell a little bit. I hope my mentee learns that they’re important and that they matter.”



“I will still remember you when I grow up. I will be a mentor just like you.”

–Fourth Grader



***Watch Full Circle
Scholars describe their
experience!***

EXPANDING CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE

As Academy 4 continues to grow in its eleventh year, it remains focused on its core values and mission while widening its circle of reach for 2022-23 and beyond:

- Academy 4 will expand into 14 new schools in the 2022-2023 school year.
- Every fourth grader will have a mentor in 40 schools across Dallas-Fort Worth and Austin, Texas and Memphis, Tennessee.
- Twenty-five partner schools will engage in the 5th grade LEADERS 5 program, in which last year's 4th graders (now 5th graders) will take the leadership skills they learned last year and put them into action as they serve as mentors to 1st graders in their schools.
- Academy 4 will extend the Full Circle Scholars Program in 2022-23, providing even more continuity across feeder schools.
- These subsequent programs will promise specific checkpoints on students' leadership and social and emotional skill growth throughout the middle school years, finally culminating in an opportunity for students to serve as mentors themselves in high school and apply for a Full Circle Scholarship in their senior year.
- Finally, Academy 4 will host its 4Families program with three church partners. 4Families is a tool for Academy 4 church partners to encourage and build community among families, particularly the under-resourced. 4Families will offer workshops that start with parenting and expand to other subjects such as financial literacy, leadership, English as a second language, spiritual formation, and other topics targeted to the needs of the community.

All of this means that more students, mentors, campuses, and communities will benefit from the positive experiences the program cultivates. "Having community people come in and volunteer of their own time and their own talents lets us know that we're not alone," says one teacher, "I know it is making a big impact."

"The staff of Academy 4 and those who specifically take care of my school are a partner in supporting educating the whole child."

—Principal



As leaders of school communities, principals highly value the program. "Not only have the sessions been great—but the volunteers (mentors) have been so positive and upbeat," says one principal, "The staff of Academy 4 and those who specifically take care of my school are a partner in supporting educating the whole child. They are well organized, prompt, and always have a great attitude." Another principal describes how it "takes a whole village to raise kids" and that "A4 is a great example of a community organization that does just that!"

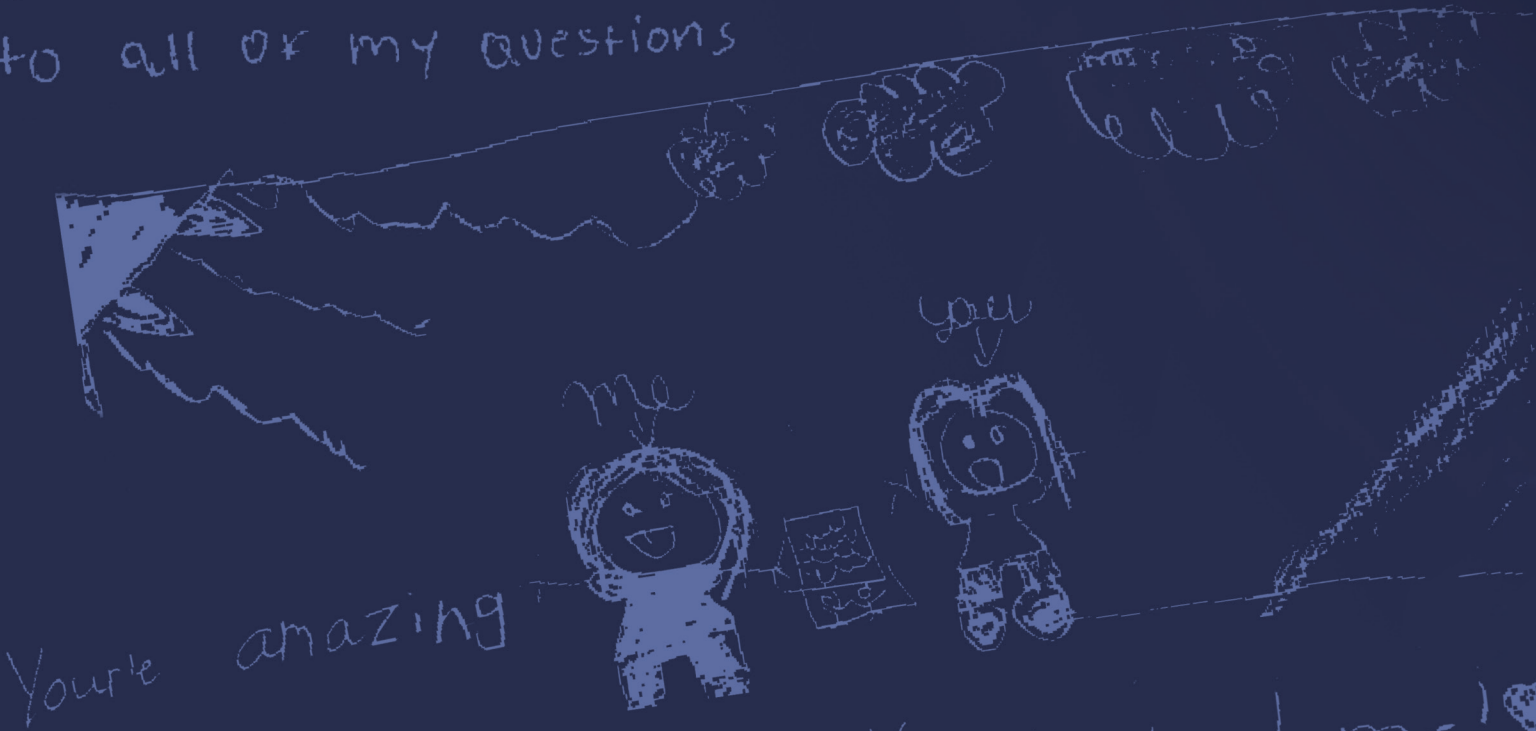
Finally, offering students the opportunity to engage with the Academy 4 program benefits the entire campus community. A principal says, "They helped ME realize that relationships and having opportunities to connect can really be the game-changer for students. I'm blessed to have this. This is a huge addition to my campus and it even helps to attract families to our school."

Academy 4 Executive Director, John Shearer, reiterates that these benefits are woven into the fabric of Academy 4's purpose. John says, "We are grateful for our wonderful school and church partners, volunteers, and donors for walking alongside us for the past 10 years. Together, we are instilling values of hope, responsibility, leadership, and community in schools and families."

To learn more about all of Academy 4's programs, visit academy4.org.



I would like to thank you for making me feel comfortable during the zoom meetings, and hanging out with me and Beliving in me and for listening to all of my questions



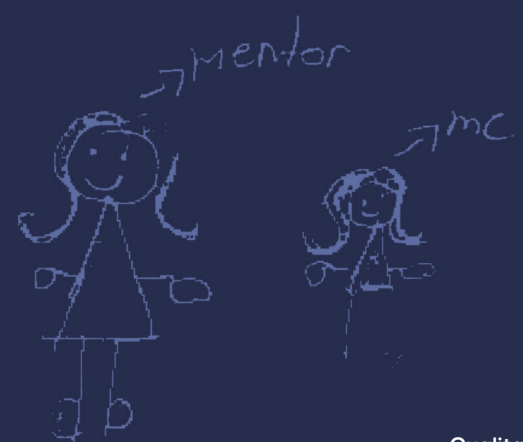
You're amazing

I can't wait to see you next time!



Very friendly

You're very special to me



To learn more or get involved, visit www.Academy4.org



Qualitative research provided by
RESOURCES
for **LEARNING**